

# *Illumine*

## *The Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society Graduate Student Association*

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**Centre for Studies in Religion and Society Graduate Student Association**

The Centre for Studies in Religion and Society (CSRS) was established at the University in Victoria in 1991 to foster the scholarly study of religion in relation to the sciences, ethics, social and economic development, and other aspects of culture. The CSRS Graduate Student Association, led by graduate students who hold Fellowships at the CSRS, draws together UVic graduate students from a range of departments and academic programs who share an interest in areas related to the research mandate of the CSRS.

The inaugural issue of *Illuminate* represents a continuation of the Association's tradition of producing an annual publication containing graduate students' written scholarship exploring the interrelation of religion and society. Copies of these prior publications are available from the CSRS. In addition to the production of *Illuminate*, the Association undertakes events such as luncheons and discussion forums. For further information, please contact Angela Andersen ([normang@island.net](mailto:normang@island.net)), the Association's coordinator for 2002-03.

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## Introduction

The Graduate Student Association of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, is pleased to offer the inaugural issue of *Illumine*, a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary graduate journal. The objective of *Illumine* is to provide a discriminating and imaginative, scholarly forum for written work by British Columbia graduate students that explores any facet of the interdependency between religion and society. Additionally, it is the hope of *Illumine*'s editors that the journal will contribute to the development of a scholarly community among its targeted audience; this, by fostering awareness of common research fields and interests that might spark future collaboration or inspire mutual, intellectual and academic benefit.

*Illumine*'s interdisciplinary character reflects the integral involvement of humankind's religious life within all dimensions of society and culture. Consistent with this, the journal strives for a capacious approach that encourages the unfettered examination of the multifarious ways in which this involvement has been manifested throughout human history. Contributors are free to employ any among a breadth of academic domains, theoretical paradigms, methodological apparatuses, and expository formats. Also in this vein, *Illumine* is committed to comparativity and seeks to include writings that analyze a variety of religious traditions and concomitant, cultural or civilizational contexts.

This issue presents six articles that together exemplify the broad scope of our new publication. In her innovative paper, 'The Virgin's Peculiar Breast: Negotiating Nudity in Devotional Paintings', Nancy Yakimoski contributes a provocative examination of representations of nudity in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Christian paintings. Yakimoski synthesizes feminist art history interpretations of the process of assigning meaning to stylized and realistic depictions of nudity, together with her own reading of the relationship between lived and represented Christianity.

May Ying Mary Ngai's essay, 'The Origins of the *Jingzong xuehui* 淨宗學會, or the Pure Land Learning Center', provides a detailed and original historical analysis illuminating the ways in which the centuries-old tradition of Pure Land Buddhism in China has proven conducive to the

rise of a modernized, Taiwan-based Pure Land Learning Center. In charting the development of Pure Land Buddhism, Ngai demonstrates how a line of relatively recent leaders within the tradition have prepared the ground for the tradition's adaptation to globalization and the prevalence of modern, information technology.

In 'Overcoming Metaphysics: George Grant and the Good Beyond Being', Randy 'Peg' Peters engages closely with a variety of primary texts – both published and unpublished – by the eminent Canadian philosopher, George Grant. On this basis, the article offers a compelling analysis of how Grant interpreted the Platonic notion of the 'Good beyond Being' as a religiously significant foundation for contemplative thought and just action in the modern world. Peters examines how Grant both drew upon and distinguished himself from other philosophers, notably Martin Heidegger and Simone Weil, in an effort to overcome the effects of hegemonic, modern rationality.

In his paper, 'Coming to Our Senses: Rediscovering Rites of Passage for Contemporary Youth', Patrick Amos discusses the erosion of socially sanctioned rites of passage for youth and offers his model, drawn primarily from First Nations Elders, for a wilderness healing program for youth. Amos suggests that through intense immersion experiences in Nature, a supra-personal self-concept will emerge, generating an initiatory process. Whereas this does not include the participants' own evaluation of the program, it presents a thought-provoking beginning for dialogue about adolescent needs and alternative treatment programs.

Marking a transition from the essay format, Steve Bentheim contributes an interview with the prominent scholar of Buddhism, Robert Florida. 'Eastern Buddhism and Western Ethics: An Interview with Robert Florida' stands as an object example not only of the effectiveness of the interview as a methodological approach to research, but also the virtue (and inherent challenges) of engaging comparatively between Buddhist and Western conceptions of ethics. The interview format reveals the extemporaneous nature of a dynamic dialogue, resulting in a lively presentation of ideas.

The issue concludes with ‘*Dastafshani (Ecstasy): The Art of S. Mohammad Ehsaey*’, Leslie Stanick’s review of a Vancouver exhibition of contemporary Islamic calligraphy as abstract painting. The article is a strikingly illustrated account of how the work of Ehsaey, an Iranian master calligrapher and graphic artist, bespeaks his ‘remembrance of God’. Integrating an interview with the artist, the review is notable for its intimate engagement with lived, religious experience – specifically, calligraphy centering on the painted inscription of the name, Allah, and the phrase, ‘la ilaha illa Allah’ (‘there is no god but God’).

Especial gratitude is extended to those persons who, along with our contributors, have helped to make possible the inception of *Illumine*. Professors Conrad Brunk and Harold Coward have generously conferred financial and institutional support, as well as encouragement. Connie Carter, Moira Hill, Susan Karim, and Judy Weisgerber have provided unfailingly kind assistance with the many complexities of production and administrative matters. Not least, Dealla Fahlman contributed creatively to the initiation and development of *Illumine*. Thank you all.

**Nancy Newlove and Andrew M. Wender**

## The Virgin's Peculiar Breast: Negotiating Nudity in Devotional Paintings

Nancy Yakimoski

### Abstract

*According to hermeneutics scholar Margaret Miles, during Tuscany's early Renaissance nudity in devotional art produced a tension between sexual (erotic) attraction and religious meaning. Specifically, glimpses of the Holy Mother's exposed breast as she nursed the Christ child could encourage the 'wrong' kind of looking; this disrupted the sacred status of her image and destabilized religious meaning. To manage potential erotic readings while attempting to foster 'proper' (devotional) gazes, painters made specific artistic choices when representing the Virgin's bare breast. Obliging artists turned to the art of an earlier era – art that emphasized the symbolic rather than the naturalistic. This paper argues that employing a pictorial program and style that consciously represented the breast as denaturalized and disembodied transformed it to a symbol which relieved the tension between religious meaning and voyeuristic looking while still communicating religious message(s).*

When the Sienese artist Paolo di Giovanni Fei painted his *Madonna and Child* in the 1370s [Fig. 1], he generally followed the standard pictorial conventions of other nursing Madonna, or *Madonna lactans* paintings.<sup>1</sup> Against a plain background, Mary is clothed in a simple blue robe with the hood drawn over her head. She usually sits directly on the floor, or upon a cushion on the floor, and in her arms she holds the Christ Child; sometimes the Virgin is shown standing, as seen in this panel. Mary grips Christ gently but firmly; her right hand supports His bottom and with her left, she cups the Child's shoulder, holding Him to her chest. As He nurses and plays with His foot, He looks out of the picture frame towards the viewer. While these are the common elements found in many

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<sup>1</sup> While it is not certain for whom the painting was intended, the panel likely stood on an altar in a church's chapel or used in a domestic interior as an object for veneration.

contemporary nursing images, there is a peculiarity about the way that Fei has depicted the Virgin's exposed breast. In terms of its representation, it appears flat and cone-shaped rather than portrayed in a more realistic manner, that is, round and full of milk. What is more strange is its location; in this painting, the breast is placed very high on the torso; in fact, it is closer to Mary's shoulder than where a breast ought to be. Also strange is that the Virgin does not seem to have a second breast; there is no volume suggested beneath her mantle.

While this painting could potentially be dismissed as one artist's lack of skills at naturalism, what is surprising are the many other images of the Virgin's denaturalized and disembodied breast made by other Italian painters between c. 1330s and 1420s. For example, there is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1330 painting, *Madonna de Latte*; Carlo da Camerino's *The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve* (c. 1380); Andrea Vanni's *Madonna* (c. 1380s); a *Madonna of Humility* (c. 1420) that Lorenzo Monaco created; there are other nursing images by Fei, such as *Madonna Latte* (c. 1380s) that use the same stylistic approach. From the numerous images illustrating the breast in this specific way, we can assume that these representations were based on a conscious choice by the artists; from the many artists who adopted this convention, one can assume the theme's widespread popularity.

The appearance of these unusual breasts in Tuscan *Madonna lactans* images during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries raises many interesting questions about the interplay between representation and spectatorship. For example, what initiated and propelled this type of depiction? What kinds of messages did the nude breast evoke, and what meanings did the viewer formulate based on their religious convictions? Was the exposed breast interpreted differently by virgins than mothers? How would non-Christian viewers such as devout Jews decode and understand Mary's denaturalized breast? How did Levant slave women who were employed as wet-

nurses for Tuscan families perceive the nursing Madonna? Because spectatorship is a complex process based on the convergence of numerous factors, it is difficult to examine it thoroughly and in a meaningful way within the space of a few short pages and still point to all the complexities and interconnections. While this paper does not provide a detailed analysis of spectatorship and the role of vision in art, it does acknowledge the importance of looking in relation to understanding why the Virgin's breast is represented as it was. This discussion takes as its focus the need for certain pictorial strategies when portraying nudity in Tuscan devotional imagery. Following Megan Holmes, I believe that artists did indeed make very specific choices when representing the Virgin's bare breast – decisions that carefully negotiated a multitude of factors including satisfying the patron's requests, reflecting Church doctrine while adhering to rules of decorum, and being mindful to use a repertoire of easily recognizable, but powerful symbols. Because the exposed body in religious art could potentially encourage the 'wrong' kind of looking, that is, a voyeuristic or erotic one, artistic solutions were required to foster a devotional gaze. Using specific pictorial programs, iconographical elements, and stylistic choices, artists represented the breast as denaturalized and disembodied, thereby transforming it to a symbol. This allowed the doctrinal messages of the artwork to be communicated while downplaying or diverting gazes that were not purely religious.

When interpreting and discussing representations of the body, it must be understood that it is a site where diverse social, political, cultural, and religious factors converge. Furthermore, the body reflects the values, anxieties, and even the fantasies of a particular society at a specific historical moment. In *Carnal Knowing* feminist hermeneutics scholar, Margaret R. Miles, similarly states that within the Christian West, the naked body was treated and understood in similar ways but with different nuances and emphases within different societies.<sup>2</sup> She summarizes two types of general meanings surrounding nakedness. First, *social* meanings

had negative connotations; the naked body was an indicator of powerlessness and was associated with captives, slaves, prostitutes, the insane, and the dead. In relation to martyrdoms, when the persecutors stripped Christians of their clothing, it was intended to humiliate, torture, and punish. In contrast, *religious* meanings of nakedness were positive. When a Christian voluntarily removed his/her clothing, it was an act of shedding the secular (the sinful); it was a sign of one's adamant faith. But what happens to social and religious meanings when the naked body is a female body? According to Miles, religious nakedness must then be revised.<sup>3</sup> Both social and religious responses to the naked female body become negative because it symbolizes sin and sexual lust; in other words, she is a dangerous evil. Interestingly, religious meanings change once again when the (partially) exposed female body is that of the Virgin Mary, specifically, representations of the Holy Mother's breast while she is nursing Christ. Although paintings of Mary breastfeeding functioned as devotional imagery – they were meant to be looked at and venerated – representations that showed her bared breast complicated the viewing process. While the breast, nursing, and the milk itself reflected Christian doctrine, their religious meanings conflicted with interpretations of the exposed female body as sinful and evil. Since female nudity, especially breasts, could encourage lustful thoughts, there was anxiety over any representation of a breast, even the Holy Mother's.

Because the Virgin's body is a constructed and malleable one, it is always in the process of being shaped and re-shaped by the ever-changing needs of the Church, art patrons, and the faithful. As a result, the subjectivity of the historical Mary has been, for the most part, eliminated and replaced by a range of specific representations. She is a figure who, like other notable people in the Church, "have become vehicles of meaning intended to be identified with specific concepts and narratives...their pictorial function is to stand as reinforcing symbols for those concepts and [act] as vivid mnemonics for narratives that are already established."<sup>4</sup> As her roles, positions, and

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 81.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Harrison, 'Giotto and the 'Rise of Painting'', p. 88 in Diana Norman, ed., *Siena*,

importance in the Church were articulated, defined, and even re-defined by the Papacy throughout the course of Christian history, her depictions and iconography were modified to accommodate these changes. For example, during the two centuries prior to the popularity of the *Madonna lactans* paintings, Mary was hailed as the Queen of Heaven, and portrayed as a “Byzantine Empress, luxuriously robed, heavily jeweled, and seated on a throne surrounded by angels and worshippers”, and in some paintings, Christ, as an adult human, places a heavenly crown upon his mother’s head.<sup>5</sup> Mary’s clothing, the location (heaven), and act of crowning are reduced to symbols that were intended to facilitate the faithful’s recollection of Christian stories.

Supplanting – and contrasting – the artistic tradition where Mary was the enthroned and glorified queen residing in Heaven, or was wed to her Son in a mystical marriage, was a genre that began in the Trecento and continued for the next 300 years. From the changes in Christian thought initiated by the Franciscan and Cistercian Orders, Mary became more human and an emphasis was placed on her *humilitas* (humility). No longer did she sit upon a starry throne in heaven; rather, she was shown as a peasant mother, sitting cross-legged on the bare earth or upon a cushion on the floor, while holding and/or nursing her Son. This type of painting became known as *Madonna of Humility* and was the forerunner of *Madonna lactans* images. Emphasis was placed on her humanity, her homey simplicity, and unpretentious accessibility.<sup>6</sup> Mary was everyone’s Mother; she was approachable, caring, and stood by the faithful, acting as an intercessor on their behalf.

Blending with, and succeeding, the popularity of the *Madonna of Humility* genre were the *Madonna lactans* images. Like the *Humility* paintings, they were another popular theme that

artists painted for display and use in churches, monasteries, and in private homes.<sup>7</sup> While still portrayed as a humble woman, there was a new feature: an emphasis on breast-feeding her Son. I would argue that the Church has purified aspects of Mary’s pregnancy and delivery by denaturalizing them. For example she was a virgin when she conceived Christ, the conception took place through the power of the Holy Spirit, and during the birth process, her maidenhead remained intact. She was allowed one natural and biological function, that of nursing. The significance of the nursing Madonna and the symbolism of her milk would have been readily understood by viewers as they beheld paintings displaying her breast. In fact, this type of image served as a mnemonic to a number of Christian beliefs and teachings. First, the lactating breast emphasized her humanity and by fourteenth-century standards, the Virgin nursing Christ was the supreme example of her humility and lowliness. Because Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden brought about the Fall, womankind’s punishment was to endure all the biological sufferings related to childbearing: menstruation, the birth process, and lactation.<sup>8</sup> Mary was no exception. Secondly, the nursing breast functioned as guarantor of Christ’s humanity. As defined and proclaimed by the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, Mary was the *Theotokos*; she was the ‘God-bearer’ or ‘Mother of God’.<sup>9</sup> On a representational level, images of her nursing Christ affirmed that He was born of a woman, and like other children, He required the same nourishment from His mother. In this way, the suckling Christ attested to His full humanity. Third, the breast was interpreted as a symbol for the spiritual nourishment of the faithful. In some versions of *Madonna lactans* paintings, the nursing Christ twists around to look directly at the viewer. This was an established visual device for inviting the viewer to participate in the scene.<sup>10</sup> It

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*Florence and Padua; Art, Society and Religion 1280–1400, Vol. I: Interpretive Essays* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Margaret R. Miles, ‘The Virgin’s One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture’, p. 202 in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture; Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *The World of the Early Sienese Painter* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2001), p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> Miles, ‘The Virgin’s One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture’, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy; A Primer in the Social History*

was believed that the Christian soul was perpetually sustained by Mary's grace; this grace was connected to her breast milk. It is not surprising, then, that depictions of the Virgin were transformed by the Church into the Nursing Mother of many penitents, visionaries, and saints.<sup>11</sup>

While the exposed breast affirmed and reinforced both Mary's and Christ's humanity, and functioned as a source of spiritual nourishment, it also indicated Mary's intercessory authority, that is, it signaled her role as a Mediatrix in the redemption of humanity. The theology on the Virgin's intercession clearly states that she does not have the power to grant requests by herself; rather, she can only intercede on the people's behalf with her Son since God is the only source of salvation. Interestingly, when she is represented as an intercessor, usually the adult Christ also appears with her indicating that her breast is a post-lactating or non-lactating breast based on Christ's age. The power of her breast is no longer based on its actual or symbolic nourishment. Rather, it becomes the locus of power for her role as Salvatrix, a 'bargaining chip' if you will, that she employs when taking the faithful's petitions and prayers to Christ. Mary's use of her breast to persuade Christ to grant the devout's petitions can be seen in an early fifteenth-century painting, *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin* by Lorenzo Monaco. With one hand, Mary gestures to a group of sinners kneeling before Christ and with her other hand, she cups her breast, which is carefully draped by a diaphanous veil. In the text that bridges the space between herself and Christ, she implores: "Dearest Son, because of the milk I gave you, have mercy on them."

While this discussion has mainly concentrated on the ways that the Virgin's breast and breast milk reflected contemporary religious messages, what still needs to be addressed is the issue of nudity in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century devotional paintings. Megan Holmes summarizes two key positions on this, one from art historian Caroline Walker Bynum and the

other from Miles.<sup>12</sup> As Bynum argues, nudity in art would have been perceived metaphorically or allegorically rather than erotically, as in the case of a twenty-first century understanding of erotic as sexual. She also states that this type of imagery was not completely devoid of erotic elements; Bynum concedes that such elements did exist in affective spirituality. For example, in her discussions of Christ's body, she agrees with Leo Steinberg's statement that early Renaissance artists made Christ's penis the focal point of their depictions so as to indicate His humanity. She goes on to state that she does not necessarily believe that Christ is represented with an artfully draped erection underneath His resurrection clothing, Bynum does concur that certain elements were used to ensure that the viewer's primary associations were based on established Christian doctrine, specifically, the recognition of His humanity.<sup>13</sup> By having saints point or gesture towards His exposed genitals or paintings that show the Virgin touching the Christ child's penis, nudity was used to indicate the most obvious evidence of His humanity. With respect to the Virgin's bared breast, Bynum limits discussion to allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of it, discussing it only as nourishment and food, choosing not to address its potential to encourage voyeurism. While it is easy to assume from a twenty-first century perspective that nudity in religious art only served in a negative manner by eliciting undevotional gazes, Miles balances the argument, stating that nudity in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tuscan religious art could have been utilized in a positive way. For example, *Madonna lactans* paintings would have assisted mothers in their identification with the Virgin based on their commonality, motherhood, which included lactating breasts.<sup>14</sup> Mary's breast also

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of *Pictorial Style*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 72 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Maginnis, *The World of the Early Sieneese Painter*, p. 198.

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<sup>12</sup> Megan Holmes, 'Disrobing the Virgin: The *Madonna Lactans* in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art', footnote 2, p. 284 in Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, eds., *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 39 (1986), p. 407.

<sup>14</sup> However, Miles is quick to add that while visual associations were used to create this connection, it was contradicted by religious teachings and sermons that emphasized Mary's difference from women.

referred to and articulated religious beliefs: it was understood as a guarantor of the Virgin's and Christ's humanity; it could be interpreted as spiritual sustenance; it could be understood as the locus of her power as Mediatrix.

Miles also delves into the complexity of nudity in devotional art and the tension created when viewers saw a peek of the exposed Holy breast. Such glimpses must have produced some level of anxiety because of the potential for carnal pleasure; this must have been of great concern to artists, and to clerics guiding the faithful. To contend with these possible readings while attempting to foster veneration, artists needed to represent Mary's breast in ways that used the customary iconography of the nursing Virgin while being mindful of Church doctrine, and heeding the rules of decorum. *Madonna lactans* thus employed specific pictorial techniques: the Virgin's breast was represented as non-integral and detached from her body.<sup>15</sup> Artists such as Fei, as well as others including Carlo da Camerino, Andrea Vanni, and Lorenzo Monaco intentionally portrayed the breast in this way in order to transform the breast into a symbol. At a symbolic level, it could both communicate religious messages while managing undevotional responses to the nudity. The power of the symbolic works to downplay transgressive gazes while still being able to use nudity to communicate religious messages. In Fei's *Madonna and Child* panel painting for instance, the depiction and placement of the breast positions the viewer to accept that Christ is holding Mary's breast even though there are no visual clues that would link the breast to Mary. It seems to simply appear by his mouth. In fact, the breast appears to belong more to the iconography of the Christ child<sup>16</sup> than to Mary's body because of the way the panel has been painted; His hands and face are painted the same flesh colour as His mother's breast, and this is further highlighted against the dark blue colour of Mary's mantle which visually severs the breast from her body. This results in the connection between her breast and Christ but at the expense of disembodiment of the breast. Additionally, it has

been stylized to such a degree that perhaps, to some viewers, the breast does not even appear to be human which further inhibits a voyeuristic and/or erotic gaze. For instance, the same stylization and representation has been used by Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1338–9 portrayal of the She-Wolf's teats from which Romulus and Remus suckle in the *Allegory of Good Government* in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico in the Sala dei Nove (council chambers). The similarities between the representations of the nursing breast/teat are striking. Arguably, in each case the breast/teat does not have to be depicted with great accuracy (naturalism) because the shape and context immediately signals to the viewer what is represented. When fourteenth- and fifteenth-century audiences saw a woman, a child, and a shape resembling a breast placed near the child's mouth, these select iconographic elements symbolized nursing. This audience, drawing upon their visual training as informed by their religious teachings, would have immediately recognized what the image was supposed to portray without having to closely examine what was actually depicted, and without the need for a realistic rendering. Thus the symbolic is able to convey the religious message(s) while tempering voyeuristic gazes.

Another way to negotiate the various demands arising from nudity in religious art was to complicate or somehow impede potential erotic readings by downplaying or diverting a voyeuristic gaze. For instance, in Marco Zoppo's *Madonna Lactans* (1478), the Christ child's head was used to obscure the breast from the viewer's sight. As well, the Child's hand could cover up a large portion of the exposed breast which Ambrogio Lorenzetti employed in his *Madonna del Latte* (c. 1330). Artists depicted the breast so that it was either partially or completely hidden by Mary's veil or by the drapery from her cloak as seen in Andrea di Bartolo's *Madonna and Child*, c. 1415. The Virgin could also participate in hindering glimpses of her breast by discreetly covering it with her hand, concealing all but the nipple, which was a sign of her *pudore* and decorum. To highlight the need for symbolism and distancing techniques in order to deter transgressive gazes, it is useful to compare a detail of Fei's painting of a denaturalized and disembodied breast with the Netherlandish painter Robert Campin and his use of naturalism.

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<sup>15</sup> Miles, 'The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture', p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to credit Angela Andersen for this observation.

Although the painters are from two different regions (Italy and the Netherlands), differing artistic traditions, and the paintings are separated in time by approximately sixty years, the visual comparison highlights how realism forces the viewer to interpret the exposed breast differently than a stylized breast. In Campin's painting titled *The Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* (1430), Mary's hand is on her breast, positioned to stimulate milk flow rather than to cover it. In fact, the placement of Mary's hand on her breast and the fact that it is pointed directly at the viewer directs attention to it. While the design of the painting was meant to invite the faithful to take spiritual nourishment from the Virgin's breast, the realism with which it is portrayed, positions the viewer to interpret the breast differently than if it was stylized. With the exposed breast naturalistically rendered in conjunction with the way Mary's eyes are averted which makes it easier for the viewer to look without consequence, there is a greater possibility for carnal viewing pleasure than when an artist represents the same subject matter symbolically.

When Italian artists did use heightened realism in their nursing Madonna paintings, they incorporated various techniques in order to downplay the naturalistic breast.<sup>17</sup> When it was exposed, her divinity was accentuated and her humanity was de-emphasized. In Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Madonna in Glory with Saints* (1490–96), Mary's ample breast, purposefully displayed since Christ is about to nurse, is represented naturalistically. Tempering an erotic reading of this naturalistic breast, Ghirlandaio removes Mary from the earthly realm by idealizing her, and aligning her with the aristocracy instead of the peasant class, which is a pronounced change from the *Madonna of Humility* and *Madonna lactans* images. Her location within Ghirlandaio's painting further separates her from the material world: Mary, seated on a heavenly throne, hovers between heaven and earth. Her elevation above the heads of saints and angels accentuates this extraction from the earthly realm. She also seems unaware of anything and anyone except her Son, whose hands reach and frame the exposed breast moments before He suckles. Her eyes are cast

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<sup>17</sup> Holmes, 'Disrobing the Virgin: The *Madonna Lactans* in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art', p. 180.

downwards and gaze solely upon Christ, oblivious to the saints and angels below her feet, as well as to the viewer. Ghirlandaio has successfully returned Mary to the realm of the symbolic but has done so through the use of realism. Artistic devices that once emphasized the Virgin's humanity and humility have been removed and substituted with symbols referencing her divinity. The impact of visually disconnecting Mary from the viewer's space and situating her in the beyond, frames the interpretation of the breast differently. No longer is it the breast of a human mother; rather, it is the breast of a divinely favoured and idealized woman who is about to nurse the Saviour.

While naturalism was being used during the time when *Madonna of Humility* and *Madonna lactans* paintings were popular, why were artists not embracing realism? Art historian Millard Meiss, in *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (1951), claims that the appearance of Tuscan art dramatically changed after 1348, which was the year of the Black Death, and there are obvious changes in both religious and cultural sensibilities which are manifest in the arts. The post-plague generation of Florentine painters rejected, at least in part, many of the accomplishments and qualities of Giotto's artistic legacy which had dominated Florentine painting during the first half of the fourteenth century.<sup>18</sup> This was also happening in Siena where a later generation of artists rejected the achievements of Duccio di Buoninsegna, Simone Martini, and Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti – artists who incorporated naturalism in their work to heighten the narrative by humanizing saints and scriptural figures, thereby evoking a strong reaction from the viewers. Instead of choosing this naturalistic way to represent people and events, Meiss argues that the post-plague artists represented Christ, the Virgin, saints and holy people as iconic and deliberately archaic. He attributes the marked changes in the painting in Florence and Siena to a sequence of economic and natural disasters happening in the middle of the fourteenth century: bankruptcies, famine, war, and as previously mentioned, the

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<sup>18</sup> Diana Norman, ed., *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280–1400, Vol. I: Interpretive Essays* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), p. 178.

Black Death.<sup>19</sup> These events profoundly affected the people of the time. Interpreting the calamities as punishment for their preoccupation with worldly affairs, people desired religious art that was more intense; this promoted stylistic changes. Meiss states that paintings become “more religious in a traditional sense, more ecclesiastical, and more akin to the art of an earlier time.”<sup>20</sup> If Meiss is correct and if his argument can be applied to *Madonna lactans* paintings, this would explain why many of these images look more like Byzantine icons, and seem to be different from the work of Giotto and his contemporaries who used realism. As for *Madonna lactans* images, Megan Holmes notes that in Florence, between 1440s–1470s, this genre begins to go out of fashion, and when it re-emerged in the last quarter of the Quattrocento, it was modified. The paintings were “...less immediate, less accessible to the beholder’s appropriating gaze.”<sup>21</sup>

As this paper has discussed, when naturalism became the desirable way to represent the body in fourteenth– and fifteenth-century Tuscan painting, an anatomically correct breast had the potential to disrupt the sacred status of devotional images and destabilize religious meaning. Obliging artists adhered to Church doctrines and rules of decorum in order to create paintings that fostered a devotional gaze and moved viewers to greater piety. In order to do so they turned to the art of an earlier era, art that emphasized the symbolic rather than the naturalistic; they embraced the iconic rather than the realistic, and when portraying the Virgin’s exposed breast, they represented it as denaturalized and disembodied. Another solution was the emergence of a new devotional genre that did not feature Mary’s exposed breast; in the late fifteenth century, *Madonna lactans* images were slowly replaced by paintings of the Adoration of the Child where Mary kneels before and over the Christ child who is laying on the ground. As for her lactating breast, it was safely tucked away and hidden

beneath her cloak, perhaps no longer needing to be represented at all.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 178–9.

<sup>20</sup> Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1951), p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, ‘Disrobing the Virgin: The *Madonna Lactans* in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art’, pp. 193–4.



Fig. 1: Paolo di Giovanni Fei, *Madonna and Child*, 1370s. Tempera on wood; gold ground; 87 x 59.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941. (41.190.13). All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Images referred to in essay text** (in order of discussion):

**Paolo di Giovanni Fei**

*Madonna and Child*, 1370s

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

image:

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/iptg/hod\\_41.190.13.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/iptg/hod_41.190.13.htm)

**Ambrogio Lorenzetti**

*Madonna del Latte*, c. 1330

Palazzo Arcivescovile, Siena

image:

[http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/l/lorenzetti/ambrogio/3m\\_latte.html](http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/l/lorenzetti/ambrogio/3m_latte.html)

**Lorenzo Monaco**

*Madonna of Humility*, c. 1420

Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen

image:

<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/l/lorenzo/monaco/diptych1.html>

**Paolo di Giovanni Fei**

*Madonna del Latte*, 1380s (?)

Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana, Siena

image:

<http://www.solarnet.org/Travel/art/Siena.htm>

**Lorenzo Monaco** (Pietro di Giovanni)

*The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*, early fifteenth century Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

image:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/view?view=detail&id=53%2E37>

**Ambrogio Lorenzetti**

*Allegory of Good Government*, 1338–9

Palazzo Pubblico, Sala dei Nove, Siena

image:

[http://www.abcgallery.com/L/lorenzetti/allegory\\_of\\_good\\_government.html](http://www.abcgallery.com/L/lorenzetti/allegory_of_good_government.html)

**Andrea di Bartolo**

*Madonna and Child*, c. 1415

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

image: <http://www.nga.gov>

**Master of Flémalle** (Robert Campin)

*The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*, 1430

National Gallery, London

image:

<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/m/master/fllemalle/2/virgin.html>

**Domenico Ghirlandaio**

*Madonna in Glory with the Saints*, 1490

Alte Pinakothek, Munich

image:

<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/g/ghirlandaio/7panel/11pala1.html>

# The Origins of the *Jingzong xuehui* 淨宗學會, or the Pure Land Learning Center

May Ying Mary Ngai

## Abstract

*It is because of the popularity of Lianshe, the Lotus Society, that Pure Land Buddhism became the most prevalent and influential Buddhist school among ordinary Chinese people. However, since the downfall of the Qing Empire in 1911, Chinese society has experienced drastic social and cultural changes, particularly after 1949, when two governments, one Mainland Chinese and the other Taiwanese, came to confront one another from across the Taiwan Strait. Nevertheless, a modernized Lotus Society, the Pure Land Learning Center, has emerged as the times require. These new, individually established Centers carry on the tradition into the age of globalization and computerization by developing an internationally based network that is well-equipped with updated information technology. In order to better understand the underlying reasons behind the success of these transformations, this pilot study intends to focus on the traces of the historical link and Dharma lineage of the Learning Center and its leader, Jingkong (1927–), a Buddhist master. Those who have influenced Jingkong include another Buddhist master, Yinguang (1860–1940), and two lay Buddhists, Li Bingnan (1888–1986), and Xia Lianju (1882–1965).*

## Introduction

Thanks to the popularity of *Bailianhua she*, 白蓮華社, the White Lotus Society, commonly known as *Lianshe* 蓮社, the Lotus Society, Pure Land Buddhism, or the Pure Land School, became the most prevalent and influential Buddhist school among ordinary Chinese people.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 402 CE by the

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<sup>1</sup> The names *Lianshe* and *Bailian she* 白蓮社 (the White Lotus Society) are the shortened forms of the *Bailianhua she*, which was named after: (1)

Buddhist master Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416 CE) on Mount Lu 廬山 in the province of Jiangxi 江西, for the purpose of obtaining salvation to the Western Pure Land by faith in its presiding Buddha, Amitābha,<sup>2</sup> the gathering of the Lotus

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the white lotus pond in the Donglin Monastery 東林寺 on Mount Lu, where lived the first Patriarch of the Pure Land School, Huiyuan 慧遠; and, (2) according to the Pure Land scriptures, the lotus flowers into which the Pure Land practitioners are said to be reborn. As for Pure Land Buddhism, or the Pure Land School, it is one of the Buddhist schools in China based on the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Great Vehicle of Buddhism, “whose followers vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of delivering all other sentient beings from suffering. The spiritual hero of the Mahāyāna is the Bodhisattva, in whom the virtues of wisdom and compassion are stressed and balanced.” Garma C.C. Chang (Chang, Chen-chi), ed., *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūta Sūtra* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1983), p. 478.

<sup>2</sup> According to the major scriptures of the Pure Land School, Amitābha, the Buddha of infinite meritorious qualities, was a monk named Dharmākara (Fazang 法藏). After learning the teachings from Lokeśvararāja Buddha (Shijianzizaiwangfo 世間自在王佛), Dharmākara, who at the time was still a king, decided to become a monk and carry out practices of *bodhisattva* as well as resolved to attain Buddhahood for the salvation of all sentient beings. In front of Lokeśvararāja Buddha, he made the solemn vow to create a wonderful world, where reincarnate, sentient beings could enjoy happiness and attain Buddhahood effortlessly. In order to fulfill Dharmākara’s vow, Lokeśvararāja Buddha taught and manifested the magnificence and meritorious virtues of all Buddhas’ worlds for him so that he could model his world on the very best he had seen in the manifestation of other Buddhas’ worlds. After making the decision on the design of his world, Dharmākara then characterized the features of his world by generalizing them in the form of forty-eight specific vows. After thousands of years of self-cultivation and bringing salvation

Society has long been recognized as a model for the Pure Land practitioners of later generations. Even now, the organization, principles and ritual traditions of the Lotus Society can still be found in some modern Asian countries like Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, where the large majority of inhabitants are of Chinese descent. However, the Lotus Society and its traditions were established at the time of an agrarian society, fitting in with the needs of that way of life.<sup>3</sup> After being influenced by the process of industrialization, and recently by digitalization and globalization, this agrarian culture has been experiencing a series of social changes. In the face of these changes, the questions arise: could the customs of the Lotus Society remain unchanged? Could there be alternative Buddhist groups for the new generation?

After the Nationalist government of the Republic of China was driven from Mainland China to Taiwan in 1949,<sup>4</sup> the traditions of

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to others, Dharmākara was completely enlightened and became Buddha Amitābha; the Pure Land resulting from his accumulated meritorious virtues was established as a world free of every cause of suffering and prepared with surroundings necessary for the salvation of its residents. Amitābha still presides over it, assisted by Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, the two *bodhisattvas* representing the natures of compassion and wisdom respectively. For details, see the three major Pure Land scriptures: the four translations of the *Infinite Life Sūtra* (the Wuliangshou jing 無量壽經; the Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra) in the *Dazangjing* (the Buddhist Canon), vol. 12, no. 360: 265c–279a; no. 361: 279b–299c; no. 362: 300a–317c; and no. 363: 318a–326c; the *Amitābha Sūtra* (the Foshuo Amituo jing 佛說阿彌陀經; the Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra) in the *Dazangjing*, vol. 12, no. 366: 346b–348b; and the *Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life Sūtra* (the Foshuo guan Wuliangshoufo jing 佛說觀無量壽佛經; the Amitayur-dhyana-sūtra) in the *Dazangjing*, vol. 12, no. 365: 340c–346b.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> After 1949, many Buddhist groups transferred their lineage to Taiwan from Mainland China. Since then, the development of Chinese Buddhism has taken place mainly in Taiwan. This is an important historical phenomenon and needs a brief

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explanation here [the following history is an abstract of information found in the following two books: Chen Lingrong, *Rijushiqi shendaotongzhixia de taiwan zongjiao zhengce* (Taipei: Zili wanbao, 1992), pp. 71–100, 117–31; and Lan Jifu, *Ershishiji de zhonggrifojiao* (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1991), pp. 59–63].

Before Japanese occupation (1895–1945), the result of the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki at the end of the 1894 Sino–Japanese War, Buddhist ritual traditions in Taiwan were mainly inherited from the lineage of Yongquan Monastery 湧泉寺 on Mount Gu 鼓山 of Fujian 福建, which has the geographical advantage of being the Mainland Chinese province closest to Taiwan. As for the theory of practice, the Caodong 曹洞 and Linji 臨濟 Sects of the meditational Chan School and the Pure Land School were the mainstreams; in other words, most Buddhist groups emphasized the dual practice of Chan and Pure Land. However, the reality is that fewer than ten monks out of several thousand comprehended the meaning of the Buddhist scriptures that they recited daily; the rest of them joined the *sangha* (monastic fellowship) simply for living and sheltering. During the early period of Japanese occupation, Japanese Buddhism had almost no influence on Chinese Buddhism; it served mainly for Japanese who lived in Taiwan. As time went on, Japanese authorities gradually announced a series of decrees to either restrict or prohibit many indigenous religious activities. In order to survive, many religious organizations, including those of Chinese Buddhism, asked for protection from or simply joined Japanese Buddhist groups. After 1926, Shintō 神道 (the Way of the Gods), the native religion of Japan known for its worship of agrarian and ancestral gods, was promoted alongside military expansion by Japanese imperialists. In 1934, the Japanese announced that each community should establish at least one Shintō temple as an educational center for its community. For this political reason, the influence of Shintō on Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan was greater than the influence of Japanese Buddhism since then.

Chinese Buddhist traditions finally regained their influence on Buddhist groups in Taiwan around 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party defeated the National People’s Party in the civil war fighting for the dominion over Mainland China. Thus, following 1949, many practitioners of different Buddhist schools went to Taiwan along with the retreat of the Nationalist government, the Republic of China. Almost all these Buddhist groups took

Chinese Buddhism did not entirely die out but were forced to migrate to another geographical area across the straits – Taiwan, where for decades, the Pure Land School has managed to carry out self-reforms to cope with the change. Growing out from the base of the long standing Lotus Society, the resulting ‘new’ organization is called *Jingzong xuehui* 淨宗學會, or the Pure Land Learning Center. It was founded by the Buddhist master Jingkong 淨空 (1927– ; Ching-k’ung), who has been teaching Pure Land doctrines and scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism for more than forty years. His years of ceaseless effort in publicizing the teachings of the Pure Land as well as his establishment of the Learning Center have drawn attention from Chinese Buddhists all over the world. Through their efforts, an increasing number of Learning Centers have been established. In addition, Jingkong is noted for his pioneering employment of multi-media and cyber technology containing Buddhist teachings as well as his leading role in the worldwide, free distribution of over three million texts and tapes about Pure Land Buddhism. Recently, Jingkong has focused on the training of Buddhist lecturers, most of his students coming from China, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States. The primary goal of this pilot study is to act as a starting point for exploration into the underlying reasons for the success of the transformation from the locally-based national Lotus Society to the internationalized Learning Center, with emphasis on the historical and *dharma*<sup>5</sup> lineage backgrounds.

### The Historical Origins of the Pure Land Learning Center – the Lotus Society

The term *Lianshe*, or the Lotus Society, has long been recognized by Chinese

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over existing Buddhist monasteries in Taiwan, and reestablished and reformed their systems of administration and ritual ceremony. When this occurred, the influences of Japanese Buddhism and Shintō were easily uprooted and replaced.

<sup>5</sup> The term *dharma* here refers to the teachings of the Truth.

Buddhists as an alternative name for Pure Land Buddhism, or the Pure Land School. Originally, this term referred to a group of one hundred and twenty-three *nianfo*<sup>6</sup> 念佛 practitioners, both monks and lay Buddhists, led by Huiyuan on Mount Lu. The group is known for its gathering in 402 in the Donglin Monastery 東林寺, where its members practised and observed teachings of Pure Land Buddhism and made a vow in front of an image of Buddha Amitabha in the hopes of being reborn in the Western Pure Land.

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<sup>6</sup> *Nianfo* 念佛, literally meaning ‘to recite the name [of Amitābha]’, is in fact a general term that can be used to refer to a wide range of Buddhist practices. For the Pure Land School, the term is a complex expression of four different kinds of Pure Land practices. As Yü Chün-fang states:

[t]he four kinds of *nienfo* [*nianfo*] are enumerated in the following order: (1) *ch’eng-ming nienfo* [*chengming nianfo* 稱名念佛, or *chiming nianfo* 持名念佛], or calling upon the Amitābha’s name in the manner prescribed in the *A-mi-t’o ching* [*Foshuo Amituo jing*; the Amitābha Sūtra]; (2) *kuan-hsiang nienfo* [*guanxiang nianfo* 觀像念佛], or concentrating one’s attention on a statue of Amitābha made of earth, wood, bronze, or gold; (3) *kuan-hsiang nienfo* [*guanxiang nianfo* 觀想念佛], or contemplating the miraculous features of Amitābha with one’s mind’s eye in the manner described in the *Kuan-ching* [*Foshuo guan Wuliangshoufo jing*; the Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life Sūtra]; (4) *shih-hsiang nienfo* [*shixiang nianfo* 實相念佛], or contemplating Amitābha as no different from one’s own self-nature, since both Amitābha and self-nature transcend birth and extinction (*sheng-mieh* [*shengmie* 生滅]), existence and emptiness (*y[o]u-k’ung* [*you kong* 有空, or *kongyou* 空有]), subject and object (*neng-so* [*neng suo* 能所]).

See Yü Chün-fang, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), p. 45. Since the recitation of Amitābha’s name became the most common Pure Land practice among ordinary people by the effort of the Lotus Society, the term *nianfo* was mistakenly simplified to refer specifically to the recitation method. Thus, in order to avoid any inappropriate generalization or misinterpretation of the term, this paper all along uses the *pinyin*, a system of romanizing Chinese ideograms.

Above all, members of this fellowship were all believed to have successfully attained the rebirth, which has become the ideal or symbolic achievement for successors of later generations who resolve to organize activities and associations of this kind. Hundred of years later, the leader of the gathering regained attention from Buddhist groups but this time with a new status in a patriarchal tradition. By the effort of Zongxiao 宗曉 (1151–1214) of the Song Dynasty (960–1280), Huiyuan became the first patriarch of a new born Pure Land School at the beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In his compiled collection, *Lebang wenlei* 樂邦文類 (Various Writings on the Land of Bliss), Zongxiao indicated that Huiyuan was the first patriarch for his role in organizing the Lotus Society as well as specifying the *nianfo* practice. However, neither Huiyuan's writings nor those of his contemporaries made reference to the name of the Lotus Society.<sup>8</sup> The earliest record of an

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<sup>7</sup> It is said that, before the publication of Zongxiao's (1151–1214) *Lebang wenlei* (Various Writings on the Land of Bliss) in 1200, there was no record of a patriarchal tradition for the Pure Land School. See Yü Chun-fang, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the earliest record of the founding of a school for Pure Land Buddhism, there are two views. One claims that a Pure Land School did exist during the early period of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), as supported by a source written by a Korean named Wonhyo (617–686), while the other deems that a Pure Land school was not formed until the Song dynasty. The former view is still used by David W. Chappell in his article, 'The Formation of the Pure Land Movement in China: Tao-Ch'o and Shan-Tao', pp. 139–71 in James Foad, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne, eds., *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1996), pp. 140, 167. The proof he used to support his claim is a Chinese phrase, *yizong* 一宗 (a school).

However, Tang Yongtong quotes a good deal of evidence from historical documents to expound on the changing of the meaning of this phrase corresponding to the historical changes and development of Buddhist activities at the time. According to his penetrating analysis on the issue,

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Tang points out that, before the Song, the Chinese character *zong* 宗 had at least two meanings in terms of Buddhist terminology, namely, 'discourse' and 'school'. He explains that, before the sixth century, a person's argument on a theory or exegesis on a Buddhist scripture can also be called *zong*. Thus, at the time when Wonhyo used the phrase *yizong*, he could have meant either 'a discourse', or 'a school'. To further verify Wonhyo's meaning, Tang turns to the history of the forming of Chinese Buddhist schools. On his view, only after the early Sui Dynasty (581–617) did the character *zong* include the meaning of a school or sect. Before the Sui, Buddhist teachers were called *jingshi* 經師 (the teacher of Buddhist scriptures) or *lunshi* 論師 (the teacher of Buddhist treatises). They usually interpreted Buddhist scriptures according to their own understandings. Those who wanted to learn the theories or teachings developed by these teachers could have traveled from place to place to freely attend their lectures; there was no record of any existence of a teacher–student organization (that is, a school) yet.

Until the beginning of the Sui, an official position called *zhongzhu* 眾主 (the leader of the mass), deemed as the precursor of the forming of a school, was founded by the Emperor Wendi with the purpose of operating a better–organized system for the teaching of Buddhism. Later, organizations named *jiao* 教 and sects like Sanjiejiao 三階教 (the Three Stages Sect) arose, each of them advocating its own theories or exegeses on Buddhist scriptures, so that, before long, the word *zong* probably started to be equated with the meaning of *jiao*. Accordingly, the phrase used by Wonhyo most likely just referred to the meaning of 'discourse'; that is, the discourse or teachings on the Pure Land(s). This conclusion can also be supported by the fact that teachings on different Pure Lands aside from that of Amitābha were very popular at Wonhyo's time in China. Hence, the argument about the meaning of the phrase as 'a school' seems to be too weak to predate the existence of the Pure Land School. Therefore, this paper adopts Tang's view on the founding period of the Pure Land School, not only for its higher degree of reliability but also for its being widely accepted by scholars of the field. For details, see Tang Yongtong, 'Lun zhongguo fojiao wu shizong [On the Issue that There Is No So-called Ten Schools in Chinese Buddhism]', pp. 221–26 in Zhang Mantao, ed. *Zhongguo fojiao de tezhi yu zongpai* (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chubanshe, 1978).

associated theme, *shiba gaoxian* 十八高賢 (the Eighteen Sages),<sup>9</sup> only appeared at the time of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), as seen in the poems by the well-known Buddhist poet Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, some documents suggest that the association of organizations of *she* 社 and *hui* 會<sup>11</sup> with Buddhist activities was already formed in the sixth century, long before Tang. This argument is supported by a quotation from the *Jieshe faji wen* 結社法集文 (Essay on Forming a Society to Gather Dharma [or Buddhist teachings]) by the Song monk Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001). According to this essay, during the reign of Emperor Wenxuan 文宣王 (r. 550–559) of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577), the Emperor had called at least once for a gathering of both monks and laymen to carry out Buddhist practices together; yet this event appears to be merely an occasional incident at the time.<sup>12</sup> In fact, based on existing primary sources and recent researches, it is only in the Song Dynasty that, by the effort of Shengchang 省常 (959–1020), the organization of *she* or *hui* came into vogue and the activity of *jieshe nianfo* 結社念佛 (forming a society to practice [methods of] *nianfo*) became popular outside monasteries, that is, among lay Buddhists.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The Eighteen Sages refers to the eighteen most prominent members out of the total of one hundred and twenty-three gathered on Mount Lu.

<sup>10</sup> See Tang Yongtong, *Han wei liangjin nanbeichao fojiao shi* (Taipei: Luotuo chubanshe, 1987), pp. 366–7; and Tsai Hsing-li, *Chen Hungshou's Elegant Gathering: A Late-Ming Pictorial Manifesto of Pure Land Buddhism*, Ph.D. diss. (Lawrence, Kans.: Univ. of Kansas, 1997), pp. 109–10. On Huiyuan, see Chen Shunyu, *Lushan ji, Dazangjing*, vol. 51: 1025–1051; and Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*.

<sup>11</sup> Both characters bear the meanings of ‘meeting’, ‘gathering’, ‘association’, ‘society’, and ‘union’.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see the *Dazangjing*, vol. 47, no. 1969A: 177b.

<sup>13</sup> Li Xiaoben, ‘Zhongguo jingtuzong shi [History of the Pure Land School in China]’, p. 108 in Zhang Mantao, ed., *Jingtuzong shilun* (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chubanshe, 1979). However,

Therefore, the tradition of patriarchal transmission for the Pure Land Buddhism created by Zongxiao in 1200 can be deemed as a production that reflects the popularization of the establishment of religious organizations based on the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism after the promotion of Shengchang.

As noted in the *Jingtu shengxian lu* 淨土聖賢錄 (Record of Sages and Worthies of the Pure Land), under the guidance of Shengchang, the seventh patriarch of the Pure Land School, a *Jingxingshe* 淨行社 (the Pure

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back in the Tang Dynasty, most of the organizations that concentrated on the practice of *nianfo* and advocated the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism were either monasteries or monastically operated; they were more frequently called *Daochang* 道場, Arenas of the Way. This is reflected in the *Jingtu shengxian lu* 淨土聖賢錄 (Record of Sages and Worthies of the Pure Land), a huge, detailed chronicle of the biographies of those who were believed to be successfully reborn into the Pure Land of Amitābha. According to this source, most titles of those monasteries associated with Pure Land Buddhism or *nianfo* practice are called *Daochang* 道場. For examples, see the *Nianfodaochang* 念佛道場 (the Nianfo Arena of the Way) under the entry of Qihan 齊翰 (p. 97); the *Wuhuonianfodaochang* 五會念佛道場 (the Five Assemblies of Nianfo Arena of the Way) under the entry of Fazhao 法照 (p. 100); and the *Xifangdaochang* 西方道場 (the Western Direction Arena of the Way) under the entry of Wei Wenjin 韋文晉 (p. 261). Regarding the title of *she*, a *Xifangshe* 西方社 (the Western Direction Society) can be found under the entry of Shenhao 神皓 (p.71). See Peng Jiqing (1740–1796), ed., *Jingtu shengxian lu* (Tai-chung, Taiwan: Taizhong lianshe, reprint 1992), pp. 71, 97, 100, and 261. And according to Daniel B. Stevenson, *daochang* “is a Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word *bodhimanda*, which specifically means the ‘site where the Buddha attained enlightenment.’ By extension, it has also come to refer to any site where the Buddha (or the enlightenment that is the Buddha’s essence) is ritually invoked, sought, or found.” See Daniel Stevenson, ‘Pure Land Buddhist Worship and Meditation in China’, pp. 359–79 in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 363–4.

Practice Society), modeled after the Lotus Society,<sup>14</sup> was founded in the province of Zhejiang 浙江 during the Chunhua 淳化 era (990–994).<sup>15</sup> In order to honor Huiyuan and his fellowship as well as to indicate their goal of attaining rebirth together, a total of one hundred and twenty–three aristocrats and prominent government officials vowed to concentrate on the Pure Land practice.<sup>16</sup> This

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<sup>14</sup> Originally, the term Lotus Society specifically meant the organization founded in 402 on Mount Lu; however, as the teachings and practices of the Pure Land became widely spread, the term was conceptualized to refer to the activities of forming a society to practice the method of *nianfo* as a means to obtain salvation. Thus, societies that bear different titles but carry out the activities discussed herein can generally be called the Lotus Societies.

<sup>15</sup> Peng Jiqing, *Jingtu shengxian lu*, p. 115. Other examples of similar activities in the Song dynasty can be found in the same book. The issue of *jieshe nianfo* is briefly discussed in Li Xiaoben’s article, in which Li mentions that: in 996, a society of monks and lay Buddhists was organized by Zunshi 遵式 (963–1032); in 1015, a *Nianfoshijiehui* 念佛施戒會 (the Nianfo and Precept Giving Society) was started by Zhili 知禮 (960–1028); in 1017, a *Bailianshe* 白蓮社 (the White Lotus Society) on Mount Dongye 東掖山 was founded by Benru 本如 (981–1050), the prime minister, and other Buddhists; after the Yuanfeng 元豐 era (1078–1088), a *Jingyeshe* 淨業社 (the Pure Karma society) was established by Lingzhao 靈照, who led the seven–day *nianfo* practice of twenty thousands practitioners every spring; a *Jingtuhui* 淨土會 (the Pure Land Society) of hundred thousands monks and lay Buddhists was set up by Jingyan 淨嚴 and the prime minister Wen Yanbo 文彥博 (1006–1097); and in 1089, a *Lianhuashenghui* 蓮花勝會 (the Lotus Magnificent Society) by Zongze 宗曠 (fl. 1086). All of these activities took place in the vicinity of Jiangzhe area and some of such gatherings even involved tens of thousand people. See Li Xiaoben, ‘Zhongguo jingtuzong shi’, pp. 108–9.

<sup>16</sup> Since the unprecedented success achieved by the fellowship of Huiyuan has become a symbol of being successfully reborn into the Pure Land under the leadership of the Lotus Society, the number of the group has become a symbol as well. Likewise, Jingkong of the Pure Land Learning Center has

event was so successful that a thousand monks also joined the society. Undoubtedly, it was such a grand–scale congregation that people took delight in talking about it. The immediate result was the widespread of the movement of *jieshe nianfo* among society (*shenjin minjian* 深浸民間),<sup>17</sup> which was particularly welcomed by the elite and largely popularized in the Jiangsu 江蘇 and Zhejiang provinces as well as the surrounding areas in southern China.<sup>18</sup>

Like most advocates of Pure Land Buddhism, Shengchang’s motivation behind the forming of the Society was mainly out of “the admiration of the custom of Mount Lu (*mu Lushan zhi feng* 慕廬山之風).”<sup>19</sup> This fact indicates that the advocacy of the *nianfo* practice and the assembly on Mount Lu were significant enough to uphold the traditions of the society and pass them down to the later generations. Huiyuan and the customs of Mount Lu have undoubtedly become symbolic elements of the leadership of the School. Hence, all succeeding patriarchs and advocates never hesitated about carrying on such advocacy and traditions, and regarded the society as an effective tool in promoting Buddhist teachings among people. This remained unchanged and lasted until the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). For instance, the tenth Pure Land patriarch Xingce 行策 (1628–1682) and the eleventh patriarch Shixian 實賢 (1686–1734), in 1670 and 1729 respectively, began the advocacy of the Lotus Society among people after years of war and disorders between the downfall of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the establishment of the Qing.<sup>20</sup> Besides, since 1800, under the influence of the twelfth patriarch Jixing 際醒 (1741–1810), the Zifu Monastery 資福寺 on

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adapted the same idea to the practice of *nianfo*, such that the number of people allowed to join the practice was limited to one hundred and twenty–three.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Peng Jiqing, *Jingtu shengxian lu*, p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> Shoucheng, ed., *Lidai jingtu gaoseng xuanji* (Taipei: Fotuo jiaoyu jijinhui, 1992), pp. 24, 26.

Mount Hongluo 紅螺山 in Beijing 北京 became the biggest *daochang* specializing in Pure Land practice in China.<sup>21</sup> This was where Shengliang 聖量 (1860–1940; Yinguang 印光), the later thirteenth patriarch, had spent five years practicing austerities and *nianfo*.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, under the guidance of Yinguang, the Lingyanshan Monastery 靈岩山寺 of Suzhou 蘇州 in the province of Jiangsu became another famous *daochang* specializing in *nianfo* practice after 1937; because of his great influence, the Lotus Society soon prospered throughout China.<sup>23</sup>

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Fig. 1: Yinguang

Yinguang's advocacy and teachings were observed and developed by his disciples. Among them, the most influential one for the contemporary development

of Pure Land Buddhism is Li Bingnan 李炳南 (1888–1986), who fled to Taiwan in 1949 with the army and officials of the Nationalist government of the Republic of China. It was there that he established the first Lotus Society in the Tai-chung 台中 (Taizhong) area in 1951.<sup>24</sup> His effort and ability in preaching and

organizing allowed him to carry on Yinguang's tradition. It is on this foundation that the advocating of the modernized Pure Land Learning Center was fostered.

### The Dharma Lineage of Jingkong – the Leader of the Pure Land Learning Center

Li Bingnan was an important lay figure for his succession to the Pure Land teachings popularized by Yinguang in China as well as for his diligent promotion of Pure Land Buddhism in Taiwan,<sup>25</sup> where he was notable

chung, Taiwan: Taizhongshi fojiao lianshe, 1996), pp. 17 and 411.

<sup>25</sup> Most information concerning Li Bingnan is based on the Chinese source *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji* 雪廬老人淨土選集 [Selected Works of the Old Xuelu on the Pure Land] and Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660–1990* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1999). However, some of their records are not consistent. Because *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji* was written two months within the death of Li, I choose to follow it wherever a contradiction occurs. Examples of differences can be seen in Jones's book: on p. 122, he writes that before Li undertook a strict vegetarian diet, he "had been a revolutionary famous for his seemingly endless capacity for alcohol and meat"; however, no such description of "seemingly endless capacity for alcohol and meat" can be found in his Chinese biography and autobiographical articles. In addition, Jones mentions that Li "began corresponding with the master, and within a year he journeyed to Shanghai to take the Three Refuges under him." Here, according to the Chinese source, Li took the Three Refuges under Yinguang through correspondence by the recommendation of a disciple of Yinguang; Li began corresponding with Yinguang only after, not before, the Three Refuges rite. Also on the same page, Jones writes that: "[h]is reputation spread, and in 1931 he received an invitation to go to Nanjing to assume the directorship of the 'Agency for Making Offering to the Past Masters Who Achieved Sagehood of the Republic of China'...". However, according to the Chinese source, Li received the invitation not simply because of his reputation but because of his previous performance in the editorial task as well as the recommendation by the editor-in-chief. Besides, Li was not the director of the Office. On p. 123, Jones includes

<sup>21</sup> Yanxing 演性 and Xinzhong 新鐘, eds., *Lianzong shisanzu zhuanlue* (Taiwan: Sanbao dizi, 1997), p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Yuanche 圓徹, 'Lianzong shisanzu zhuan zhongyin liutong xu 蓮宗十三祖傳重印流通序 (Preface on the Reprint and Spread of the Biographies of the Thirteen Patriarchs of the Pure Land School)', pp. 1–4 in *ibid.*, p. 3. Aside from these activities, many Pure Land advocates also made contributions to modifying rituals and *nianfo* practices as well as clarifying the principles and philosophical system of Pure Land Buddhism. A notable example is the revival movement of the release of living creatures by Zhuhong 祿宏 (1535–1615), the ninth patriarch of the Pure Land School, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Shoucheng, *Lidai jingtu gaoseng xuanji*, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, ed. Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji bianji weiyuanhui (Tai-

in spreading the Pure Land doctrines and ways of practice. Even after his death in 1986, his thirty-eight years of ceaseless teaching and writing still have a considerable influence on the contemporary elite and people of different social classes.<sup>26</sup> Above all, in terms of Buddhist practice, his efforts sustained the tradition of *jieshe nianfo*, through which the tradition of the Lotus Society was popularized to the rest of the island from the Tai-chung area. The practice of *nianfo* has become the major form of practice in Taiwan to this day.<sup>27</sup> Under the guidance of Li, Jingkong successfully built up the solid foundation and capabilities for his future achievements in both teaching and leadership.

In order to thoroughly understand Jingkong as a successor to the *dharma* lineage from Yinguang through Li, and as a reformer who emphasizes the modernization of the ancient form of Lotus Society, a study of Li's philosophy and accomplishments is of the utmost importance.



Fig. 2: Li Bingnan

Li Bingnan was a native of Jinan 濟南 in Shandong 山東, the home province of Confucius. His parents named him Li Yen 李豔, but he is best known as Li Bingnan. Like

many children of educated families, he studied Confucian classics in a traditional Chinese educational system. At the young age of twenty-three

the “Lingshan Temple” as one of the Buddhist “enterprises” founded by Li, but, according to a Chinese source [Xingfan, *Wangsheng jingtu zhuan jiyou* (Gaoxiong: Gaoxiong wenshu jiangtang, 1997), pp. 280–1], it was established in 1938 by a local Buddhist nun, Deqin 德欽 (1888–1971), eleven years before Li's arrival in Tai-chung, Taiwan.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660–1990*, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

(1912), he was elected as the first president of an educational institution organized by various academic groups in Jinan; his diligence in popularizing education was soon recognized and publicly praised by the Shandong provincial government. Beginning in 1920, he worked for the Judiciary. From 1934 to 1937, his literary competence earned him a respectful government position as one of the editors engaged in recomposing and reediting the county annuals of Jinan. Upon finishing the editorial work, he was immediately appointed, by the recommendation of the Editor in Chief, to work for the *Dacheng zhisheng xianshi fengji guanfu* 大成至聖先師奉祀官府 (The Office of Sacrifices to the Greatly Accomplished Supreme Prior Teacher) as a government officer in charge of offerings to Confucius and other related matters. He was soon promoted to the position of Secretary in Chief of the Office. In 1949, while in his 60's, he left Mainland China (along with the Office and the government) for Taiwan, where he continued to hold the same post until his resignation.<sup>28</sup>

Li married twice, wedding Zhao Defang 趙德芳 after the death of his first wife, Zhang Defu 張德馥. However, his wife, his son Junlong 俊龍, and two granddaughters were not able to leave for Taiwan in time and remained in Mainland China for good. He remained single in Taiwan, living in a small house alone and in an austere way. He retained his health and vigor well into old age and refused being taken care of by his students until he was ninety-five.<sup>29</sup>

Li has been recognized as an energetic man of versatile talents. Other than his knowledge of Confucianism and poem writing, he also mastered Chinese medicine and sword playing. When he was in Tai-chung, people noticed that he worked in The Office of Sacrifices by day and taught Confucianism and Buddhism in various *daochang* at night. Other than these tasks, he also lectured on the *Analects* and Buddhist

<sup>28</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, pp. 14–16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

scriptures in the Medicine College of China 中國醫藥學院, as well as on Chinese poetry, the *Record of Rites* 禮記, and Buddhism in Chung Hsing 中興 and Tung Hai 東海 Universities in Tai-chung.<sup>30</sup>

This characteristic of versatility is reflected in Li's study of Buddhism, as well. From around 1920 to 1928, he studied Buddhist teachings of the Weishi 唯識 School (the Consciousness-only School)<sup>31</sup> from Mei Guangxi 梅光羲 (b.1879) in a *Foxueshe* 佛學社 (the Buddhism Learning Society) near Lake Daming 大明湖 in Jinan. Then, from about 1928 to 1936, for another eight years, he studied Buddhist teachings of the Chan School<sup>32</sup> under the guidance of Keguan 客觀 of the Jingju Monastery 淨居寺, Jinan, and Zhenkong 真空, who was invited from Beijing by the Jingju Monastery. From 1937 to 1945, he studied Tantric teachings<sup>33</sup> for, once again, eight years, from Gongge Hutuktu of the White Sect 白教貢葛呼圖克圖 and Nuona Hutuktu of the Red Sect 紅教諾那呼圖克圖.<sup>34</sup> All of Li's teachers were famous for their expertise in their own fields of Buddhist study and were respected by their contemporaries. Li's versatile talents

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> The ideology of the Weishi School is based on the idea of *weishi* 唯識 (*vijñāna-mātra*; Consciousness-only), which is a form of Buddhist doctrine holding that nothing exists aside from consciousness.

<sup>32</sup> Generally speaking, the Chan (or Zen in Japanese) School is a meditational school founded in China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma. It is known nationwide for the dramatic story of the succession of its sixth patriarch, Huineng (638–713).

<sup>33</sup> The Tantric teachings here refers to Tibetan Buddhism, which is greatly different from Chinese Buddhism in terms of the ways of practice that involve visualization on the complicated pictures of *mandala*, or rostrum ground, and the use of hand gestures (*mudrā*, mystic positions of the hand).

<sup>34</sup> Hutuktu, or Grand Lama of Uрга, is the modern term 'Ulan Bator' in Mongol. See John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Teaching, Practice, History and Schools* (London: Century, 1987), p. 214.

broadened and deepened different aspects of his understanding of Buddhism, which served to enrich his religious experience and prepare him for his future career in teaching. Surprisingly, after his diligent studies of Weishi, Chan, and Tantric teachings, Li did not encourage his students to follow in his steps. Nonetheless, he concluded that, because of its flexibility in meeting people's needs and living conditions, Pure Land Buddhism was the school of doctrine and practice best suited to Buddhists of his time.<sup>35</sup>

According to his own account, Li became a Pure Land practitioner in about 1930, shortly after he came across several freely distributed booklets concerning the teachings of the Pure Land School.<sup>36</sup> These booklets were printed, distributed freely and mailed on request by the *Honghuashe* 弘化社 (Grand Influence Society), a society organized by Yinguang in Suzhou to print and distribute Buddhist scriptures and related materials. After some time, working by correspondence, Li took the rite of Three Refuges<sup>37</sup> under, and received his Buddhist name Deming 德明 from Yinguang. From this point forward, Li kept in touch with Yinguang: he continued his study by reading Buddhist scriptures, and published letters and writings by Yinguang; and, at the same time, he frequently inquired and learned from his teacher through correspondence until Yinguang's death in 1940. In about 1934, a business trip finally gave him the chance to visit Yinguang, who was at that time in sealed confinement<sup>38</sup> in the Baoguo Monastery 報國

<sup>35</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, pp. 20, 416–18.

<sup>36</sup> Li Bingnan, 'Yinguang dashi yuanji shizhounian jinian huiyilu' pp. 412–15 in *ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>37</sup> This is a Buddhist rite taken by Buddhists who resolve to observe Buddhism according to the three qualities of their own Buddha-nature or True Mind.

<sup>38</sup> The term *biguan* 閉關, translated as sealed confinement, literally means closed barrier. This kind of practice was initiated by Chan practitioners who isolated themselves for Buddhist practices. The place for a *biguan* practitioner to carry out the practice is called *guanfang* 關房 (the confined

寺 of Suzhou. Li spent a day talking with Yinguang, which was deemed a rare occasion since Yinguang seldom chatted with visitors for more than twenty minutes. By Li's own account, although this was the only time he could learn from Yinguang in person, the experience was splendid and invaluable.<sup>39</sup>

In his article in memory of Yinguang, Li summarizes the content of the first letter he received from his teacher, in which Yinguang answered Li's seeking of the Three Refuges by giving him the Buddhist name, setting forth the principles of Pure Land Buddhism, and pointing out some key points for the *nianfo* practice. This summary gives a glimpse of the practicality of Yinguang's thought:<sup>40</sup>

The gist of the teachings that was bestowed on me by the Old Man is:

One who studies to be a Buddha should: set forward harmonious human relations and fulfill one's duty; avoid evil thoughts and preserve sincerity; not to do any misdeeds, but pursue all good deeds; carry [these] out by oneself and transform others so as to practice Pure Karma<sup>41</sup> together. For the method of *nianfo*, [one] should insist on sustaining [the recitation of] the name [of Amitabha Buddha]; [if one's] mouth recites clearly and ears listen to [the recitation] clearly, for a long, long time, [the stage] of one-mindedness will be attained naturally. There is no need to

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room). Those who are in sealed confinement can either read and study Buddhist scriptures from the *Buddhist Canon* or concentrate on 'one' type of Buddhist practice such as *nianfo* and meditation. The time limit and goal for *biguan* vary with one's own needs. When one is in sealed confinement, one is not allowed to leave the confined room; therefore, it is necessary to have someone else to take care of the food, medications, and miscellaneous matters for the practitioner. This butler-like individual is called the *huguan* 護關 (the barrier protector).

<sup>39</sup> Li Bingnan, 'Yinguang dashi yuanji shizhounian jinian huiyilu', pp. 412–15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>41</sup> The term 'Pure Karma' here refers to the Pure Land practice.

practice visualization concurrently for [if one] does not comprehend the teachings and theories [for visualization], [when] the phenomena [to be visualized] are subtle but the mind is inattentive, contrary [to one's intentions] disadvantages will arise.

For [the issues of] sustaining a vegetarian diet and of prohibiting killing, [he] was only too pleased to exhort repeatedly...

... 老人賜給之開示，其中大要：  
學佛之人必須敦倫盡分閑邪存  
誠諸惡莫作眾善奉行  
自行化他同修淨業念佛之法宜  
執持名號口念清楚  
耳聽清楚久久自得一心不必兼  
修觀想因倘不明教相  
境細心粗反而生弊  
對於持齋戒殺更是諄諄告誡<sup>42</sup>

As stated in his biography, Li placed this letter in front of an image of Buddha and kowtowed one hundred times to show his reverence for the teachings. Li clearly had observed them seriously throughout the rest of his life, in particular the exhortation to "carry [these] out by oneself and transform others so as to practice Pure Karma together." This is exemplified by his devotion to teaching and the establishment of the multi-functional Tai-chung Buddhist Lotus Society.

Li's teaching career started around 1931, when he started to teach Buddhism locally in Jinan soon after learning about the profound ideology of the Pure Land School by reading the booklets he had obtained. In 1937, Mei Guangxi recommended to Buddhist master Taixu 太虛 (1889–1947) that Li serve as a lecturer on Buddhism to prisoners in jails. The outcome was so remarkable that he was complimented in an inscription by Taixu. Later, he set up a *Lianshe* in Mount Gele 歌樂山 of Yu City 渝市 where he taught Buddhist scriptures and practiced *nianfo* for a long time. After that, because of the chaotic political situation as a result of the Sino-

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Japanese War (1931–1945) and the following Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) between the Chinese Communist Party and the National People’s Party, Li, as an officer of The Office of Sacrifices, had to frequently move along with the government he served. Despite the difficulties he faced, he managed to teach Buddhism wherever he relocated.<sup>43</sup> Shortly after he arrived in Tai-chung, he was invited by a Buddhist nun, Deqin 德欽 (1888–1971) of the Lingshan Monastery 靈山寺, to give lectures on the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>44</sup> Since Li’s in-depth interpretation of Buddhist scriptures was rarely seen in Taiwan at that time,<sup>45</sup> his reputation soon spread and the number of his followers increased. In just two years, he founded the Taizhong fojiao lianshe 台中佛教蓮社 (the Tai-chung Buddhist Lotus Society, commonly known as the Taizong lianshe 台中蓮社, or the Tai-chung Lotus Society), from which the doctrines of Pure Land Buddhism and the practice of *nianfo* have spread throughout the whole island.

In addition to Pure Land Buddhism, Li also gave lectures on other Mahāyāna scriptures and Confucian classics like the *Analects*, *Book of Rites*, and so forth.<sup>46</sup> At the peak of Li’s teaching career, in Tai-chung

<sup>43</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, pp. 16–17, 418.

<sup>44</sup> Xingfan, *Wangsheng jingtu zhuan jiyou* (Gaoxiong: Gaoxiong wenshu jiangtang, 1997), p. 280.

<sup>45</sup> As is explained in footnote 4, before the arrival of the Nationalists from the Mainland China, most monks in Taiwan joined the *sangha* simply for living; they were trained not to teach but to perform ceremonies that were irrelevant to their studies and practices. Therefore, after the arrival of the Nationalists, partly because of the influence of this new government and partly because of the efforts of a number of elite Buddhists from China, both monks and laymen, most monasteries in Taiwan were taken over and reformed by the newcomers. However, among these elite Buddhists, Li Bingnan was the only one who mastered both the self-practice for salvation, and the teaching of Pure Land Buddhism and a wide variety of scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

<sup>46</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, p. 20.

alone, approximately two hundred thousand Pure Land practitioners were following his teachings. His career continued until the last days of his life when he passed away at ninety-seven.

Symbolically, the establishment of the Tai-chung Buddhist Lotus Society can be viewed as a substantiation of Yinguang’s teachings. Like the preceding Lotus Societies in imperial China before 1911, this Society gives first priority to propagating the teachings of the Pure Land School. However, aside from transmitting Pure Land Buddhism to Taiwan from China, the immediate influence of this Society over Taiwan’s Buddhist development is that it introduces the seven-day collective practice of *Foqi fahui* 佛七法會 (the Seven [Days] *Nianfo* Dharma Gathering)<sup>47</sup> and the rite of Receiving the Precepts.<sup>48</sup> Both rites are modelled on those that had been observed in China long before 1949. In the case of the *Foqi* ceremony, the liturgy observed by the Society is recorded in *Fomen bibei kesongben* 佛門必備課誦本 (the Buddhist Essential Recitation Manual), in which a statement mentions that the rules and the schedule of the *Foqi* ceremony are copied from the one used in the Lingyanshan Monastery 靈巖山寺 of Suzhou.<sup>49</sup> Fortunately, this liturgy survives and is titled *Lingyanshansi zhuanxiu jingtudaochang niansongyigui* 靈巖山寺專修淨土道場念誦儀規 (the Chanting and Reciting Liturgy of the Specialized Pure Land Arena of the Lingyanshan Monastery). The postscript of this Lingyanshansi liturgy reveals that it

<sup>47</sup> The purpose for this kind of gathering is to attain the rebirth in the Pure Land within the period of seven days by practicing *nianfo*, which, during the present day, is usually referred to the recitation of the name of Amitabha. This collective practice was established according to two of the School’s major Buddhist scriptures, the *Amitābha Sūtra* (the Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra) and the *Infinite Life Sūtra* (the Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra).

<sup>48</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, p. 418.

<sup>49</sup> *Fomen bibei kesongben* (Tai-chung, Taiwan: Ruicheng shuju, reprint 1982), p. 104. According to the date specified on the title page of this manual, this is a re-edition of the 1954 version.

was established by a Buddhist master Miaozhen 妙真 of the Lingyanshan Monastery in 1938 under the guidance of Yinguang.<sup>50</sup> This confirms that the Pure Land teachings promoted by the Tai-chung Lotus Society are a direct heritage from the orthodox Pure Land School in China.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, the Tai-chung Lotus Society was not organized merely for the collective practice of *nianfo* and daily or weekly gatherings; structurally speaking, it is a more complicated organization. Many affiliates have been set up one by one for various purposes; for instance, the Compassion Light Library (Ciguang tushuguan 慈光圖書館) was established in 1958 to meet readers' needs.<sup>52</sup> Within decades, a succession of further institutions was founded, namely, the Compassion Light Childcare Association (Ciguang yuyouyuan 慈光育幼院) in 1959, the Bodhi Salvation Association (Puti jiuji hui 菩提救濟會) in 1963,<sup>53</sup> the Bodhi Hospital (Puti yiyuan 菩提醫院) in 1963, the Ethics Demonstration Society (Minglun she 明倫社, a publishing house) in 1970, and many Doctrine Promotion Places (Bujiao suo 佈教所) from 1957 to 1984.<sup>54</sup> Each of these affiliated organizations, including the Tai-chung Lotus Society itself, is further subdivided into groups for specific purposes. For example, the subgroups of the Tai-chung Lotus Society include: the Salvation Society (Jiuji hui 救濟會), the Society for Releasing Living Beings (Fangsheng hui 放生會), the Chinese Tutorial Classes (Guowen buxiban 國文補習班), the Society for Printing Buddhist Scripture (Shoutuo yinjing hui 受託印經會), the Grand Influence Group (Honghua

<sup>50</sup> Miaozhen, ed., *Lingyanshansi zhuanxiu jingtudaochang niansongyigui* (Taipei: Shipusi dabeifahui, reprint 1957), p. 200.

<sup>51</sup> A brief discussion on the adoption of Lingyanshansi liturgies can be found in Charles Brewer Jones's *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660–1990*, pp. 119–22.

<sup>52</sup> Li Bingnan, *Xuelulaoren jingtu xuanji*, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> It was later renamed as Home of Benevolence and Love (Renai zhi jia 仁愛之家).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

tuan 弘化團), the Heavenly Music Class (Tianyue ban 天樂班), the Prosperous *Nianfo* Assisting Group (Rongfu chunian tuan 榮富助念團), the Society for the Annotation and Translation of Buddhist Scripture (Fojing zhushu yuji hui 佛經注疏語譯會), the Class on the Study of Inner Classics (Neidian yanjiu ban 內典研究班), the Class on How to Instruct the *Analects* (Lunyu jiangxi ban 論語講習班), the Initiation Class on National Literature (Guoxue qimeng ban 國學啟蒙班), and the Class on the Study of Social Education (Shejiao yanxi ban 社教研習班).<sup>55</sup> The unusual, highly diversified functions of these subgroups reflect that efforts had been made to carry out Yinguang's exhortation: "set forward harmonious human relations and fulfill one's duty; avoid evil thoughts and preserve sincerity; not to do any misdeed but pursue all good deeds."<sup>56</sup> Influenced by Li Bingnan, it is apparent that Pure Land practitioners in Taiwan had tried their best attempting to integrate Yinguang's teachings with the daily needs of the public. As many of these affiliates are still working properly to this day, the success of their endeavor is undeniable; as a result, the Tai-chung Lotus Society has successfully transformed the *Lianshe* into a huge social, cultural, and educational network.

### Conclusion – the Mission of Renewal

After the death of Li Bingnan, the mission of "carrying on the traditions to cope with the change of the society" passed on to Jingkong 淨空, one of Li's students who had been



training for ten years to teach Buddhism. This

Fig. 3: Jingkong

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Li Bingnan, 'Yinguang dashi yuanji shizhounian jinian huiyilu', p. 412.

transmission was carried out by a symbolic act of passing a copy of the newly compiled *Infinite Life Sutra* on to the new master by Li.<sup>57</sup>

The compilation of this scripture was done by a lay Buddhist, Xia Lianju 夏蓮居 (1882–1965), who was also the one who first proposed to establish the Pure Land Learning Center after the Second World War.<sup>58</sup> From 1932 to 1935, Xia spent three years compiling this *Foshuo dacheng wuliangshou zhuangyan qingjing pingdeng jue jing* 佛說大乘無量壽莊嚴清淨平等覺經 (The Buddha Speaks of the Infinite Life Sūtra of Majesty, Purity, Equality and Enlightenment of the Mahāyāna School),<sup>59</sup> which is a compiled version of five different translations of *Wuliangshoujing* 無量壽經 (the Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra; the *Infinite Life Sutra*).<sup>60</sup> According to the prefaces written by Mei Guangxi and Huang Chaozi 黃超子 as well as the postscript by Xia's student, Huang Nianzu 黃念祖, the release of the draft of this compiled scripture quickly attracted the attention of various Buddhist groups; it was sent to the press immediately by a Buddhist

<sup>57</sup> Jingkong, 'Xueluenshi wangsheng shizhoulian jinian', brochure (1996), p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> Jingkong, *Renshi fojiao: xinfu meiman de jiaoyu* (Taipei: Huazang fojiao tushuguan, 1997), p. 211.

<sup>59</sup> Xia Lianju, ed, *Foshuo dacheng wuliangshou zhuangyan qingjing pingdeng jue jing* (Taipei: Huazang jingzongxuehui, 1935, reprint 1992), p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 1. The five different translations are:

1). *Wuliang qingjing pingdeng jue jing* 無量清淨平等覺經 of the Latter Han Dynasty (25–220 CE);

2). *Foshuo zhufo amituo sanyesansailoufotanguodurendao jing* 佛說諸佛阿彌陀三耶三佛薩樓佛檀過度人道經 of the Wu Dynasty (222–280 CE);

3). *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 of the Wei Dynasty (222–265 CE);

4). *Wuliangshourulai hui* 無量壽如來會 of the Tang Dynasty; and

5). *Foshuo dacheng wuliangshou zhuangyan jing* 佛說大乘無量壽莊嚴經 of the Song Dynasty.

General Zhang Xianchen 張憲臣 and was reprinted several times.<sup>61</sup> Above all, it was soon reputed as the best-compiled version of the *Infinite Life Sutra*.<sup>62</sup>

However, since this scripture is a relatively new version, it was not heard of in Taiwan before 1949; the one who brought the first and the only copy to Taiwan was Huang Luchu 黃臚初 (1886–1960),<sup>63</sup> a Lieutenant General.<sup>64</sup> He gave this copy to Li Bingnan, who later bestowed it on



Fig. 4: Xia Lianju Jingkong and urged him to propagate it to the whole world. The uniqueness of this copy is even enhanced by

<sup>61</sup> For details see *ibid.*, pp. 1–8, 133–5.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 4–5.

This is the fourth compiled *Infinite Life Sutra*. The first attempt was the *Da Amituo jing* 大阿彌陀經 (the Large Infinite Life Sutra) by a Song jinshi 進士 Wang Rixiu 王日休 (d. 1173); the second one is the *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 (the Infinite Life Sutra) by Peng Jiqing (1740–1796); and the third one is the *Mohe Amituo jing* 摩訶阿彌陀經 (the Great Infinite Life Sutra) by Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857). A brief comparison of these four compiled versions can be found in Huang Nianzu, *Foshuo dacheng wuliangshou zhuangyan qingjing pingdeng jue jing jie* (Tai-chung, Taiwan: Wufeng sanbao huchihui, 1993), pp. 70–5.

<sup>63</sup> Huang took the Three Refuges in 1937 and decided to specialize in the practice of Pure Land. He fled to Taiwan in 1948 and became a monk the next year. He was given a Buddhist name, Zongjing 宗淨 (better known as Lühang 律航). In order to concentrate on the *nianfo* practice, he took the 100-day sealed confinement twice. In 1956, he became the abbot of Cishan 慈善寺 Monastery in Tai-chung, Taiwan. For details, see Xingfan, *Wangsheng jingtu zhuan jiyu*, pp. 263–4.

<sup>64</sup> Jingkong, 'Zaocan kaishi 早餐開示 (The Teaching at Breakfast)', <http://www.amtb-dba.org/Audio/Live/live.html> (6 Mar. 2000).

Li's personal marks, specifically, his manuscript of exegesis. Moreover, as the compiled scripture has since been used as the guide for the Learning Center in preaching and practice, it could be viewed as the tangible heritage left to the Learning Center by Xia.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that the roles played by Li Bingnan and the Tai-chung Lotus Society were a link between Yinguang and Jingkong as well as between the traditional Lotus Society and the contemporary Pure Land Learning Center. This transitional stage has allowed the Lotus Society to gradually adjust to social changes in a relatively stable environment in Taiwan after 1949 so that the Learning Center can be well-prepared for the process of internationalization and digitalization. The passing on of the compiled scripture demonstrates that, through Li, Jingkong was given a mission to complete Xia's plan in reviving the *Infinite Life Sūtra* and renewing the Lotus Society. Jingkong succeeded in this mission by promoting the compiled scripture and establishing the Learning Center.<sup>65</sup> In other words, Li Bingnan and Xia Lianju are important in the establishment of the Learning Center because they provided Jingkong's reforms with a solid foundation and explicit directions.

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<sup>65</sup> As has been discussed herein, Li had learned Weishi Buddhism from Mei Guangxi, who was the best friend of Xia Lianju. Hence, from Mei's close relations with Xia and from Li's keeping and transferring of the compiled scripture, Li's attitude towards Xia can be revealed even though there is no textual evidence from which one can determine if Li was an acquaintance of Xia.

# Overcoming Metaphysics: George Grant and the Good Beyond Being

Randy ‘Peg’ Peters

## Abstract

*George Grant (1918–1988) agreed with Martin Heidegger that Western metaphysics had led to a hegemony of scientific rationality or calculative thinking. In light of the controlling nature of this paradigm of thought, Grant articulated a meditative or contemplative way of thinking that was grounded in Plato’s notion of the ‘Good beyond Being’.<sup>1</sup> This paper critiques modern calculative thinking and argues that an overcoming of metaphysical language is necessary if we want to talk about reason, ethics, and God. Grant believes that only a knowing-in-love rooted in the Good beyond Being can provide a way of thinking and acting justly in the modern world.*

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<sup>1</sup> Plato uses the phrase “*epekeina tes ousias*”, or the Good beyond Being, in his famous allegory of the cave in *The Republic* [509b]. G.M.A. Grube translates 509b as: “Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.” Plato, *Republic*, G.M.A. Grube, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), p.182. By comparison, Francis Macdonald Cornford translates 509b as: “And so with the objects of knowledge: these derive from the Good not only their power of being known, but their very being and reality; and Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power.” Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, Francis Macdonald Cornford, trans. (New York and London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1945), p. 220. George Grant often quoted from Eric Voegelin’s book on Plato, in which Voegelin states: “the Agathon [good] not only makes objects knowable, but provides them with their existence and essence, though it is itself beyond (*epekeina*) essence in dignity and power. The *epekeina* is Plato’s term for “beyond” or “transcendent.”” Eric Voegelin, *Plato* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1966), p. 113.

## Technology and Western Metaphysics

George Grant, considered one of Canada’s foremost political philosophers, believed that the modern paradigm of knowledge, in its silencing of anything transcendent, left people empty and confused. Grant, through his teaching at Dalhousie and McMaster Universities from 1950–1988, argued that the Platonic notion of the Good beyond Being was a meditative way of thinking about God that shielded it from Martin Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics. Before we can explicate Grant’s thinking on the Good beyond Being, I would like to expand on what is meant by ‘Western metaphysics’. Heidegger, in his essay called, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, says that the word

metaphysics derives from the Greek *meta ta physika*. This peculiar title was later interpreted as characterizing the inquiry, the *meta* or *trans* extending out ‘over’ beings as such. Metaphysics is inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp.<sup>2</sup>

For Heidegger, metaphysics stands for a way of thinking that seeks to ‘grasp’ and stand ‘over’, and it is this way of thinking that has developed into modern scientific rationality, or what Heidegger calls ‘calculative thinking’. Grant agreed with Heidegger that modern science reduced all thinking to calculative thought. The word ‘calculative’ is connected to a type of thinking that finds its most powerful expression in modern Western technological science, and that is motivated by measurement, by the search for results. The calculative thinking which characterizes modern science is itself only

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘What Is Metaphysics?’, pp. 93–110 in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 106.

possible on the basis of having a subject that can calculate, and a ‘world’ or object which, as ‘placed before’ the subject, is easily manipulated, controlled, and contained. Heidegger called this world *technology*.

Grant wrote that technology is the “ontology of the age”<sup>3</sup> because he considered technology to be a particular paradigm of thinking which assumes that the Good is not beyond Being; in fact, it assumes that there is nothing beyond Being. For Grant, technology as a way of being had an effect on how we think about reason, how we think about ethics, and how we think about God. I will explore each of these three areas as they relate to Grant’s understanding of Western metaphysics. Afterward, I will lay out the ways in which Grant’s answer to calculative thinking differs from Heidegger’s, especially as it focuses on their differing interpretation of Plato’s phrase, the ‘Good beyond Being’. For Grant, it was only a ‘knowing-in-love’ that would be able to overcome metaphysics and offer a new language in which to speak about the Good.

### Metaphysics and Reason

Grant agreed with Heidegger that Western metaphysics tended to see human reason as independent and autonomous. The goal of calculative thinking was to place the object before oneself as a thing, and to examine it unemotionally. “Reason as project”, Grant explains, “is the summoning of something before us and the putting of questions to it, so that it is forced to give its reasons for being the way it is as an object.”<sup>4</sup> Grant believed that the subject-object dichotomy pervasive in the modern paradigm of knowing did not allow ‘otherness’ to be revealed to the knower. Grant noted that this approach to knowing reduced everything to mere objects for human control. Grant saw that this calculative way of thinking

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<sup>3</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1986), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>George Grant, ‘Faith and the Multiversity’, pp. 461–82 in William Christian and Sheila Grant, eds., *The George Grant Reader* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 462. All subsequent references to this book will be denoted as *GGR*.

was pervasive in all disciplines. It cut off the Good as a source of knowing by saying that nothing outside of quantifiable, sensory observations can be known. Without a Good beyond Being, all of nature is reduced to material facts ready for consumption. Reason, powerful as it is, is limited to that which lies within the realm of nature. As a result of modern science and technology, the Good ceased to be one of the sources of knowledge; instead, knowledge was confined and restricted to that which lay within the realm of temporal history. “Humans”, Grant says, “are fitted for trying to think openly about the nature of the whole.”<sup>5</sup> The whole is all of reality, which includes both the temporal types of elements (that which is scientifically observable through human reason), and the eternal elements (that which is beyond and transcendent). Grant believed that in order to know something or someone one needed to consider both elements.<sup>6</sup>

### Metaphysics and Ethics

Not only did Western metaphysics reduce knowledge to unaided reason, but with the eclipse of anything ‘beyond’, the language of personal ‘values’ replaced the language of the ‘Good’.<sup>7</sup> Grant argued that the Nietzschean concept of ‘value-positing’, in which people

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

<sup>6</sup> Grant believed that the scientific way of knowing could account only for temporal phenomena, but could not account for many of those experiences that cannot be reduced to calculation. How can you reduce an eagle in flight to a set of mathematical equations, or a painting by Rembrandt to a mixture of colour on a canvas? Grant often talked about how science has reduced sex to electrical impulses; see *ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>7</sup> Grant is here drawing from Nietzsche’s notion of ‘value-positing’, in which the human creates meaning by the power and control of the will. Grant says, “[i]t is forgotten that before Nietzsche and his immediate predecessors, men did not think about their actions in that language. They did not think they made the world valuable, but that they participated in its goodness.” George Grant, *Time as History*, William Christian, ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 58; see also George Grant, ‘Knowing and Making’, pp. 407–17 in *GGR*, p. 414.

choose and create their values rather than discover them, was an example of the type of calculative thinking that was so prevalent in modern society. The human act of placing a value on something is a means of controlling and ordering it according to your will. For the moderns, because the Good ceases to have any transcendent correspondence, morality is reduced to values language which may be chosen by each autonomous individual. For Grant, this was an example of how calculative thinking sought to control and manipulate even human morals for the sake of personal preference. For the ancients, says Grant, the language of ‘Good’

meets us with the overriding claim of justice, and persuades us that in desiring obedience to that claim we will find what we are fitted for. The modern conception of goodness is of our free creating of richness and greatness of life and all that is advantageous thereto.<sup>8</sup>

Grant interpreted the prevalence of values language as the domination of the will to power in Western metaphysics.

Grant agreed with Heidegger that the modern world had placed humans beyond good and evil as part of our destiny, but that did not mean for Grant that we *are* beyond good and evil in the sense that we are no longer fitted or made to be just. The modern world may behave as if morality is subjective but Grant denied that

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<sup>8</sup> Grant, *Technology and Justice*, p. 31. The idea of ‘fittedness’ comes from the Platonic notion of a thing’s end or purpose, that is, its telos. A shovel is fitted for digging – that is its purpose. A flower is fitted for blooming. A chair is fitted for sitting. A human is fitted for justice. The idea of fittedness implied that beings had a purpose that existed outside of themselves and was given to them. When the language of Good became the language of value all transcendent notion of something’s fittedness or purpose became historically dependent. Purpose could change dependent upon the person’s desire and will. With the dominance of modern science and the eclipse of anything transcendent as a source of knowledge, the Good ceased to define something’s purpose and instead became dependent on human creative choice and will.

we actually *are* beyond good and evil. Because the modern world has taken away the language of good and evil and replaced it with what Nietzsche called ‘values language’, people no longer know and understand that they are fitted for justice. For Grant, the Good must exist beyond Being to make it the source of justice. Any thinking that fails to recognize the importance of justice was to Grant an example of how pervasive Western metaphysical language had become.<sup>9</sup>

### Metaphysics and God

Heidegger believed that the realm of theology was not to be exempt from the totalizing effects of Western metaphysics. If theology meant the study of God, and ontology was the philosophical study of Being, then to mix God into philosophy was to undertake the damning practice of ‘onto–theology’. Heidegger uses the term onto–theology in his book *Identity and Difference* to describe the effect calculative thinking has on the understanding of God.<sup>10</sup> The onto–theo–logical constitution of metaphysics means that God enters into philosophy but only on philosophy’s terms. God becomes the *causa sui*, the *logos*, the prime ratio – all of which are totalizing projects of human thought. Even the act of ‘placing’ God at the top of all beings or declaring God to be the highest value is still part of the metaphysical language that sees the human as subject and all else as objects to be controlled. Although Grant appropriated Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and the resulting calculative thinking that resulted, he tried to offer a way of thinking about God that overcame what Heidegger termed ‘onto–theology’. It was this desire that led Grant to focus on the Platonic notion of the Good beyond Being. God needed to be beyond human reason and human philosophical attempts at control.

For Heidegger, calculative thinking is the *how* of onto–theology. The goal of calculative thinking is to have the world at our disposal

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<sup>9</sup> Grant, ‘Justice and Technology’, pp. 435–44 in *GGR*, p. 442.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, Joan Stambaugh, trans. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 54.

either practically or theoretically. Grant believed that Heidegger's fullest account of representational thinking as the placing of the world at our disposal was contained in his book on Leibniz called *The Principle of Reason*. Calculative thinking begins as the demand for reasons and completeness. Since an unexplained explainer (ie, God) leaves things ultimately unexplained, the principle of reason becomes an appeal to God as *ultima ratio* – the ultimate reason. God exists so that human reason can give ultimate explanations. Grant believes that it is the *how* rather than the *what* of theological assertion that is Heidegger's target. Heidegger was not out to disprove God or displace Christianity with nihilistic atheism; rather, Grant suggests that he is warning us about the language that we adopt when we talk about God and Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Grant often quoted from Heidegger's 'Letter on "Humanism"', in which Heidegger writes:

[w]ith the existential determination of the essence of man, therefore, nothing is decided about the "existence of God" or his "non-being"... Thus it is not only rash but also an error in procedure to maintain that the interpretation of the essence of the human being from the relation of his essence to the truth of being is atheism.<sup>12</sup>

### **Meditative Thinking As Response to Western Metaphysics**

Grant recognized that, for Heidegger, the history of Western philosophy had been a history of the domination and hegemony of calculative thinking. Heidegger wanted to undermine the exclusivity of calculative thinking without denigrating this mode of thinking. He desired to open a space for other forms of thinking. A first step away from the domination of calculative thinking consisted of uncovering the presuppositions which underlie it, and in

thereby seeing that calculation is not the only possibility of human 'thought'. Grant realized that Heidegger proposed another way of thinking called meditative thinking. Heidegger claimed, "[c]alculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is."<sup>13</sup> Commenting on what meditative thinking is, Heidegger said:

I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, *openness to the mystery*.

Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way.<sup>14</sup>

Heidegger says the threat of annihilation posed by the atomic age is not our greatest danger. The greater danger is the monopolization of all thinking by calculative thinking. Further, accepting calculative thinking as the only way of thinking is a greater threat to humanity than even the threat of nuclear annihilation, because in limiting thinking to calculation, the human being will "have denied and thrown away his own special nature – that he is a meditative being."<sup>15</sup> Heidegger closes this line of analysis by pointing out that the "releasement toward things" and the "openness to the mystery" which characterize meditative thinking will never happen by themselves. "They do not befall us accidentally. Both flourish only through persistent, courageous thinking."<sup>16</sup>

Grant saw that Western Christianity was guilty of associating God with Being and logic. Grant wants to understand God as beyond Being rather than as Being. This is why Grant saw in Plato's phrase the 'Good beyond Being' a way

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<sup>11</sup> George Grant, unpublished personal journal on Martin Heidegger, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on "Humanism"', pp. 239–76 in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, William McNeill, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 266.

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<sup>13</sup> These two different types of thinking are expanded on by Heidegger in his book *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit*, John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

of freeing God from Western metaphysical concepts. Grant argues that the whole Western metaphysical tradition – starting with Aristotle – of naming God must give way to a new understanding of God as pure love.<sup>17</sup> To subordinate the God of love to speculative distinctions of Being and non-Being is to resort to principles of reason which God radically transcends. Indeed, for Grant, Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s conceptual atheism is curiously one of the best weapons against the ‘conceptual idolatry’ of onto-theology. Why? Because it permits a new logic to emerge: that of gratitude and ‘knowing-in-love’. For Grant, this logic meant the readiness to receive the other as other without the need to stand over and control. It was Grant’s desire to find a language for God that was insulated from Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and calculative thinking. To accomplish this task, Grant turned increasingly to the life and writing of Simone Weil.

Grant saw in Heidegger’s meditative thinking something that he thought was an important insight into how to think. Simone Weil, the French mystic, had a notion of *attention* that Grant believed was very similar to Heidegger’s meditative thinking. In his personal journal on Simone Weil, Grant says:

Within the general philosophic tradition the place where I find writings very close to what she means by attention is in the late writings of Heidegger...When he says that meditative thinking is the “letting it lie before you and taking it to heart the ‘to be’ of beings”...whatever that may mean, it seems to me to take one close to what Simone Weil means by attention. Or in Heidegger’s writing about *Gelassenheit* [releasement], when he points to a thinking without willing, one is close again to Weil.<sup>18</sup>

### **Simone Weil’s Notion of *Attention***

For Grant, “[w]hat most supports the possibility of...consent is our attention to the

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<sup>17</sup> George Grant, private journal for class on Simone Weil at McMaster University, 1975–76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

beauty of the world.”<sup>19</sup> Grant, following Weil, understands attention to be that which waits upon the beauty of otherness to be shown. To be attentive is to be open to the coming forth of the other in itself. It is by attention to, and waiting upon, the other (human, non-human, and, especially for Weil, divine) that beauty is revealed. True attention means an emptying of the self, a letting go of the self, whereby the other appears in the truth of its beauty:

To pay attention truly is not to contract muscles etc. – but to leave oneself empty, disposable, open to that which we wait upon...Attention is finally attention to the void...It is a waiting for something to appear, to manifest itself, to reveal itself. In contemplating a picture...the beauty of the picture only appears to us when we have surrendered to something external and real – one has to open oneself to the void so that one can let something appear as itself.<sup>20</sup>

For Grant, such attention in waiting upon beauty is absent in modern science. Certainly, he would also say that the other aspects of loving – consent, openness, receptivity to otherness (human and non-human alike) – are also lacking in modern science. However, he is strongly critical of the fact that the human impulse for mastery over otherness that is manifested in modernity has eclipsed the possibility to be attentive – to wait upon – the showing forth of the beauty of the other. In order for thought to behold the greater truths (those parts of truth that more fully speak of the unity of what is), the human mind must be attentive. It is by such attentiveness that thought waits upon the enlightening of love, the illumination of the Whole. For Grant, it was the Good beyond Being that gave alterity and a sense of otherness to Weil’s notion of *attention*.

### **The Good and Knowing-in-Love**

Grant’s Platonic epistemology goes beyond thought and Being because the whole is bound

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<sup>19</sup> George Grant, ‘Introduction to Simone Weil’, pp. 238–53 in *GGR*, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> Grant, journal on Simone Weil.

together by the Good. For Grant, because the Good is beyond Being, it cannot be apprehended by mere reason alone. Grant wishes to articulate thought in terms of a ‘knowing-in-love’,<sup>21</sup> a knowing which unfolds in a different dimension from anything that emerges from the modern technical account of things. In effect, this understanding or contemplative knowing belongs to that sphere beyond the knowable to which Plato pointed. When opening oneself to this sphere, one can reasonably meditate on things in terms of the whole of reality. It is only in loving that anything can truly be known, for love requires an acceptance or consent to the fact that there is authentic otherness. Grant argued that judgment grows from an attachment to a truth which is known both objectively (as moderns would put it) and subjectively. This ‘authentic otherness’ is that part of anything that cannot be reduced to scientific data. This love has its source outside of man, outside Being itself, and springs from ‘the Good’. The Good is beyond appearance and can only be ‘seen’ by the faculty that ‘sees’ beyond, namely, love.<sup>22</sup> Without love, knowledge is condemned to a scientific mode of knowing alone. If Plato argues, as Grant suggests, that the Good is ‘beyond Being’ and that which one seeks through love, then to seek the Good by objective reasoning would be to miss it. For Grant, the Good is not subject to human reasoning; rather, we are subject to its rule. It is both the author of the human constitution and its ultimate end.

Grant said that “Plato proclaims the dependence of intelligence upon love in a much clearer way than Aristotle ...the modern apprehension of will ...implies that we stand

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<sup>21</sup>Grant, ‘Faith and the Multiversity’, p. 473. Edwin Heaven explores Grant’s idea in an essay entitled, ‘George Grant’s Knowing in Love’, *The Friend* 6 (2001), pp. 3–8.

<sup>22</sup>David Heaven, ‘Heidegger, Technology and Plato’ (1971), p. 21. This is an unpublished essay written for a seminar class taught by George Grant at McMaster in the early 1970’s. Edwin and David Heaven wrote the essay, ‘Some Influences of Simone Weil on George Grant’s Silence’, pp. 68–78 in Larry Schmidt, ed., *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1978).

over against love.”<sup>23</sup> Grant believed that the only response to the hegemony of calculative thinking was to revive the older understanding of ‘knowing-in-love’. Only love, Grant maintains, can counter the objectifying effects of modern rationality. The ancient biblical account of ‘knowing’<sup>24</sup> had this deeper connotation. Grant turned to Weil to help him articulate the importance of love. In a passage of Weil’s that he often quoted in his journal,<sup>25</sup> she says:

Man cannot exercise his intelligence to the full without charity because the only source of light is God. Therefore the faculty of supernatural love is higher than the intelligence and is its condition. The love of God is the unique source of all certainties.<sup>26</sup>

### The Good and Justice

Grant, in appropriating Weil, held that the ancient model, realized in Plato, says that the faculty of reason can take us only so far; this, because it is limited to that which lies within the realm of Being.<sup>27</sup> Because the Good is beyond Being,<sup>28</sup> it is apprehensible only through the faculty of love. Grant interprets Plato to teach that the Good is both known and loved. The importance, therefore, of character development in the pursuit of wisdom means that philosophical inquiry is connected to the whole person and not simply to the activity of the intellectual part of the soul. For Grant, following

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Conversation with George Grant’, pp. 101–09 in *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> Throughout the biblical literature there is a connection between sexual intimacy and knowledge. Love and knowledge were united in the heart. Genesis 4:1 talks about Adam’s knowing Eve and her conceiving a child. Grant says that in the older world, “the words ‘to love’ and ‘to know’ were joined. For example, because of the intensity and intimacy of orgasmic love, it was said when people freely participated in it, they ‘knew’ each other.” Grant, ‘Faith and the Multiversity’, p. 474.

<sup>25</sup> Grant, journal on Simone Weil.

<sup>26</sup> Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Grant, ‘Justice and Technology’, p. 442.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Weil, the conclusion that ‘whatever cannot be summoned to give its reasons is meaningless’ was wrong. To discount that which is beyond Being was wrong because it limits the human experience and does not allow for beauty, the mystical, and the divine. Grant lamented that the beauty of otherness is not given any meaning in the modern approach to reason. Modern notions of reason “cannot accept the existence of authentic otherness because [they] can only account for that which [they themselves have] created”.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Grant believed that we encounter otherness, whether through sexual love, or spiritual longing – we experience it as something ultimately beyond our capacity to manipulate or transform.<sup>30</sup>

Grant believed that it is only through this ‘knowing-in-love’ that the beauty of such things as Mozart’s music or human sexuality can ever be comprehended. Grant goes further and asks:

are there some works [of art] that are more worth paying attention to than others? What is given in those that are most worthy of attention? What is it that enraptures us about them, so that even in the desolation of *King Lear* or [Mozart’s piano concerto in C minor] we are enraptured? Can we describe the enrapturing as the immediate engrossment in the beauty of the work, which points to good which is quite unrepresentable?<sup>31</sup>

The scientific way of knowing had separated reason from love and thereby weakened any chance of knowing the Good beyond Being.

If Grant’s ‘knowing-in-love’ answered the reductionism of modern science, it also answered the ethical neutrality of Heidegger’s notion of ‘Being’ and meditative thinking. In response to Heidegger, Grant spoke of the ‘claim’ of justice on all. To speak of justice is to speak of what one ‘ought’ to do and any sense of

‘ought’ implies a sense that you ‘owe’ others the dignity of justice. Grant says that in the modern world, “[g]oodness’ is now apprehended in a way which excludes from it all ‘owingness.’...What is true of the modern conception of goodness...is that it does not include the assertion of an owed claim which is intrinsic to our desiring.”<sup>32</sup> Grant’s concept of ‘owingness’ is connected with his understanding of the Good beyond Being that reveals an order of justice beyond human desiring. As he states, “[o]wing is always provisory upon what we desire to create.”<sup>33</sup>

### The Good and Obedience

To ‘owe’ something or someone means that you are not in control of them. You are not standing over an object summoning forth its reasons, instead, you see in that *other* something of the Good that demands your response or obedience. Grant maintains that the idea of obedience does not close down openness when it is in response to that which you appreciate and love. Most couples would say that obedience and respect in a mutually loving marriage is not destructive of personal freedom. It is only in loving and being drawn through *eros* that one can truly be open to knowing something or someone fully. To know someone means to love them and to act in obedience towards them. To consent to their otherness is to agree that you owe something to everyone you encounter. It is here that Grant points to some weaknesses in Heidegger’s meditative thinking. For Heidegger, there was no Good beyond Being, and therefore nothing to which one owed ultimate obedience. Grant says that is precisely what is missing in Heidegger: “the greatest writer on what technique is turns his back on obedience.”<sup>34</sup> In a brilliant chapter on Grant in his recent book, *Spirit, Book, Word: An Inquiry into Literature and Spirituality*, J.S. Porter asks:

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<sup>29</sup> William Christian, ‘Religion, Faith, and Love’, pp.47–57 in Yusuf K. Umar, ed., *George Grant and the Future of Canada* (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Grant, ‘Faith and the Multiversity’, p. 464.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 469.

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<sup>32</sup> George Grant, ‘The Computer Does Not Impose on Us the Ways It Should Be Used’, pp. 418–34 in *GGR*, p. 429.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> George Grant, ‘Obedience’, *Idler* 29 (July–August 1990), p. 25.

Can you think of anything more bizarre to write about in our time than obedience? To what or to whom would we be obedient? What or whom do we reverence enough, stand in awe of enough, to proffer obedience? What could be more anti-historical, ahistorical, than obedience?<sup>35</sup>

It is only the Good beyond Being that can give content to justice. Without some sense of that 'Good beyond Being' which cannot be manipulated, one must conclude that there can be no such thing as a realm of justice where all are equal.

### **The Good and the Madman**

I have argued that Grant, in drawing from Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics, used the concept of the Good beyond Being as a way to create space for a language and understanding of the 'Other'. Grant's use of words like *attention*, *owingness*, and *obedience* was his attempt to find a language that was not grounded in Western metaphysical notions of control and objectification. It was in this overcoming of Western metaphysics and onto-theology that Grant saw a renewed place for ethics, God, and the Good. By rooting his thinking in love, Grant was able to ward off the calculative reductionism of modern science and the morally neutral response that leaves no place for justice. Grant's understanding of justice leads one to obedience but this is not an obedience that is blind and destructive to individual freedom. Instead, it is obedience to that which is lovable. This understanding of justice consents to otherness because it sees the other as lovable. Grant says that, for Plato the

opposite of knowledge of good is not ignorance, but madness, and the nearest Plato can come to an example of complete madness is the tyrant, because in that case otherness has disappeared as much as can be imagined.<sup>36</sup> For Grant, calculative thinking and Western metaphysics led to a world filled with madness because they cease to see that otherness can only exist if the Good is beyond Being.

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<sup>35</sup> (Ottawa: Novalis Press, 2001), p. 165. In this book, the Canadian author takes the reader through the writings of ten pivotal philosophical and religious thinkers of the past century and centres each of their writings around a different key word that was important to them. The book seems to culminate with the final two thinkers selected by Porter, the contemplative philosopher George Grant and the Catholic mystic Thomas Merton. Grant's key word, he believes, is obedience. I would have to agree that he has rightly distilled much of Grant's thinking into this complex word.

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<sup>36</sup> Grant, 'Faith and the Multiversity', pp. 464, 467.

# Coming to Our Senses: Rediscovering Rites of Passage for Contemporary Youth

Patrick Amos

## Abstract

*Cross-cultural research on the initiatory rituals and education of youth suggest that initiatory processes are archetypal and intrinsic processes of the human psyche, and will occur regardless of whether or not they are legitimized by any particular, official adult culture. However, in our secularized (modern, Western) society, a youth's transition from one life-stage to the next, while acknowledged, may not involve a profound transformation of his or her identity. As a contextual framework for this discussion, I will examine adolescent issues in light of the initiatory processes conceptualized by French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. Following is my presentation of a recently developed and implemented wilderness-based rites of passage experience, influenced by traditional Aboriginal cultures. It is designed to expand the initiate's self-concept from one that is egocentric, to include a more eco-centric supra-personal (larger-than-individuated-self) identity with human and more than human relations. Finally, I will consider reasons for resistance to such practices in our contemporary society, including paradigmatic constraints, incomprehension, and the perceived dangers of engaging initiatory processes.*

I used to think that life makes sense  
I now think that sense  
Makes life<sup>1</sup>

## Failing Our Youth

While it is generally accepted in our modern society that adolescence is to be characterized by a certain level of turbulence, discord, and confusion, we are increasingly faced with symptoms of a young generation in turmoil.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Pepper (High School counsellor, former director of Outward Bound Wilderness Programs), personal communication, August 2002.

Some of these symptoms are extreme: tragic suicide rates – especially Aboriginal and northern communities, apparently senseless acts of violence in urban school yards, rapidly expanding gangs, and the perils and horrors faced by children living on our streets. Subtler symptoms are found in the everyday challenges faced by young people unable to excel in the mainstream educational system, many of whom express self-destructive habits as a way out of their confusion and pain.

In considering these issues, it is interesting to note that the term 'adolescent', and the stage in life it is referring to, is a discourse peculiar to our modern way of life. As William F. Pinar suggests,

during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century certain psychological, juridical, and medical discourses intersected under particular social conditions resulting in a discourse in which emerged the full-blown figure of the adolescent, a figure without existence prior to these discursive and non-discursive operations.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps we should consider then, what has led to the development of this life-stage category in Western society? And, more compellingly, why has adolescence become a protractedly troublesome life-stage for so many of today's young people?

Many contemporary adolescent youth seem to realize instinctively, during a phase of often frenetic searching and questing, that they must find some supra-personal (larger-than-self) connection in order to emerge from childhood into adult identity. Traditional Aboriginal cultures – meaning cultural systems that have been minimally modified or unmodified by the

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<sup>2</sup> William F. Pinar, William M. Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter M. Taubman, *Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 462.

influence of colonial imposition and/or industrial and post-industrial society – have generally acknowledged this need and have endeavoured to mark this transition in the human life-stage with appropriate initiatory rites of passage.<sup>3</sup> Many of these cultures have long understood that puberty is a developmental period during which major physiological, emotional, mental and spiritual changes are occurring in the young person's life, and that such a major transition necessitates not only acknowledgement, but a sacred, holistic process of identity *re-creation*.<sup>4</sup> Young people in these cultures are carefully led through elaborate practices and rituals designed specifically to help them emerge as integrated adult human beings cohesively related within their human community, and in harmony with the natural environment. In these rituals, the whole community is involved in some way or another, and when the initiates emerge from the ordeal with their renewed identity, the whole community is likewise renewed.<sup>5</sup>

French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep suggests that a rite of passage is a trans-cultural phenomenon involving three distinct phases. The first phase is *separation*, in which the participant is removed from the structure of everyday life in the social order. In the case of adolescent initiation, this involves separation from the family, community and childhood context. The second phase is *transition* or *limen* (meaning 'threshold' in Latin), in which the

participant undergoes an intense experience that is characteristically different from that which is normal. During this phase, reality becomes fluid and the former self-construct is encouraged to die and be dissolved. Finally, there is the third phase of *aggregation* or *reintegration* wherein the participant re-enters the social order as an essentially different person with a higher status or state of being, and a new socio-political and cultural role.<sup>6</sup>

While the relative elaboration of each stage will vary according to culturally specific practice and the particular objectives of the ritual, every initiatory rite of passage will still include the combination of *preliminal*, *liminal* and *postliminal* phases. The model varies from culture to culture and specific initiatory purpose, but the template remains essentially the same. Cross-cultural research in patterns of initiatory ritual and education suggest that initiatory processes are archetypal and intrinsic processes of the human psyche, and will occur regardless of whether or not they are legitimized by any particular, official adult culture.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary Western society, however, one may argue that this kind of officially sanctioned initiatory process has all but disappeared. Although the outer form of ritual may in some cases still be practiced, much of the transformative effect has become dulled without a deep practical investment from both the initiate and community members. There still exists, for example, a variety of initiatory rites of passage experiences in our modern culture (e.g., high school graduation, driver's license, wedding ceremony, and so forth) that involve ritual and a socially recognized shift in status. However, these rituals rarely involve the intense liminal experience required for genuine inner transformation.<sup>8</sup> While the ritual may be whole-

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<sup>3</sup> The parameter I use for considering the extent of modification of traditional cultures is the degree to which their epistemologies – validated through multiple dimensions of consciousness and often inclusive of energies such as *ki/chi*, *prana*, and non-corporeal entities and energies, have been debased and delegitimized by (at first) the Church and more recently the orthodoxy of scientific materialism. No doubt, this lens evokes a spectral gradation rather than a clear (traditional vs. non-traditional) binary definition.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Grof, 'Rites of Passage: A Necessary Step Toward Wholeness', in Louise C. Madhi, Nancy G. Christopher, and Michael Meade, eds., *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), pp. 3–16.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, Willard R. Trask, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. ix.

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1960 [1909]), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Meade, 'Rites of Passage at the End of the Millennium', in Madhi, Christopher, and Meade, eds., *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage*, pp. 27–33; Grof, 'Rites of Passage: A Necessary Step Toward Wholeness', pp. 3–16.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Andrews, 'The Wilderness Expedition As a Rite of Passage: Meaning and Process in Experiential Education', *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1999), pp. 35–42.

heartedly engaged, the deeper journey and process is merely parodied. Such experiences usually end up being what transpersonal philosopher Ken Wilber refers to as *translational*, in that “the self is simply given a new way to think or feel about reality...”, rather than *transformational*, in which “the self itself is inquired into, looked into, grabbed by its throat and literally throttled to death.”<sup>9</sup>

Viewed in this context, could the extreme risk-taking behaviour that many adolescents exhibit suggest an otherwise unfulfilled hunger for this latter transformative experience? When official society does not offer viable experiences of ecstasy, transformation, and supra-personal identity, many adolescents resort to an array of alternatives, involving high-risk activities such as dangerous driving, unprotected sex, and mind-altering drug use. Because these activities and substances offer liminal experience and expansion beyond childhood consciousness that our official culture will not, they can become irresistible doorways to a new life and a new world.<sup>10</sup>

Without informed Elders and helpers to guide and manage the sacred journey, trans-rational questing can easily deteriorate into pre-rational regression.<sup>11</sup> Trouble arises when these activities are shunned by official society and the altered state experiences are devalued as amoral nonsense. Educational shock strategies, legal threats of incarceration, and ‘Just say no!’ (abstinence) publicity campaigns manage only to mock and repress the adolescent’s instinctual impulse for deeper ecstatic experiences. While drugs, for example, are used in many traditional initiatory ceremonies, their purpose is usually to facilitate an initial expansion of the initiate’s consciousness; a portal through which he or she can be introduced to new levels of consciousness

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Wilber, ‘A Spirituality that Transforms’, *What is Enlightenment?* (Fall/Winter 1997), pp. 24–5.

<sup>10</sup> Grof, ‘Rites of Passage: A Necessary Step Toward Wholeness’, pp. 3–16; David Tacey, ‘The Rites and Wrongs of Passage: Drugs, Gangs, Suicides, Gurus’, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, vol. 1, no. 4 (August 1995), pp. 3–12, p. 7; Meade, ‘Rites of Passage at the End of the Millennium’, pp. 27–33.

<sup>11</sup> Tacey, ‘The Rites and Wrongs of Passage: Drugs, Gangs, Suicides, Gurus’, p. 8.

and trans-rational worldviews of the adult culture that the initiate is presently joining. But in our official adult society, which refuses to provide successive means of exploring the trans-rational realm, many young people resort to unregulated use of whatever liminizing methods are at their disposal. While many pull out of these patterns, others, who are unable to differentiate the transpersonal impulse from pre-personal fixations, obsessions, and dissociations, become caught in deteriorating spirals: suicides, drug overdoses (or dehydration at raves), HIV, STDs, high-speed car crashes, and so forth. When our young people are left to their own devices, transformational impulses, often presented to the psyche in symbolic and irrational form, can tragically manifest as literal consequences. As initiatory researcher David Tacey implores, it is all very well for we moralistic adults to be appalled by the increasing drug problem, but our moral stand is faulty if we cannot provide youth with an alternative to drugs. It is not enough to demand that they stop taking them, when their hunger for a life beyond the childhood self is at the root of the drug problem itself and must be fulfilled in some way.<sup>12</sup>

Observed within the context of Van Genep’s initiatory model, these problems could be manifesting because our modern culture is suffering from a protracted childhood ‘stuckness’, in which *individuation* of the rational, personal self is considered the ultimate stage of human development. In many of the dominant, Western educational and therapeutic models, the healthy individual egoic self is seen as the end stage in development. Consequently, all educational, diagnostic and therapeutic efforts work toward developing individuated ego strength.<sup>13</sup>

While many Western psychological models recognize the significance of stage-based development, very few acknowledge a full-blown transformation from the narcissistic childhood identity to a completely new transpersonal adult identity. Wilber suggests this failure is attributable to a *Pre/Trans fallacy*, in

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), pp. 208–13.

which a distinction between the *pre-personal* and the *transpersonal* dimensions of development is not made, and the latter is mistakenly lumped in with the former, which is judged as developmentally inferior to individuated ego development.<sup>14</sup>

This primarily individualistic identification is the very condition that the traditional rite of passage is designed to help the initiate transcend. Whereas traditional Aboriginal cultures lead the initiate into an expanded supra-personal identification with and awareness of sacred fundamental interdependence with family, community, ecology, and all that lives (animate and inanimate, manifest and non-manifest/energetic), our modern culture instead prepares the initiate for a life of distinctive individuated 'success', most often measured in terms of acquisition, display and consumption of material goods.

But the imbalances of our modern ethos are beginning to show. At the economic level, for example, getting a job and earning money is becoming increasingly difficult for young people. Technological advances in recent decades combined with the (single bottom-line) corporate profit ethos, have driven down the value of a high school diploma and apprenticeships, and meaningful entry-level jobs have all but disappeared.

Whereas most indigenous cultures ensure that their youth make an officially recognized transformation into adulthood in their early teens, our culture is now delaying the transformation years longer, resulting in postponement of the very individualistic journey that is being promoted! The overall experience is one of confusion and dissonance, manifesting as a protracted adolescence rife with identity crises and psychological problems.

At the same time, we are faced with a growing public awareness that our present modes and levels of consumption are unsustainable. In the last decade, an increasing number of the world's top scientists, Nobel laureates among them, have been declaring that

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<sup>14</sup> Ken Wilber, 'The Pre/Trans Fallacy', in Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, eds., *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), pp. 124–29.

we are in grave danger of ecological collapse unless we make core changes to the way we live.<sup>15</sup> That respected members of the scientific establishment have begun to echo the serious concerns of most environmentalists and traditional indigenous people, marks an epochal shift in human consciousness in which, for perhaps the first time in human history, no matter what our cultural affiliations or political opinions, we can no longer assume that 'everything is going to be okay'. As the teacher, scholar, and Elder social activist Joanna Macy points out:

Until the late twentieth century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. Each assumed, without questioning, that its children and children's children would walk the same Earth, under the same sky. Hardships, failures, and personal death were encompassed in the vaster assurances of continuity. That certainty is now lost to us, whatever our politics. That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.<sup>16</sup>

To frame these issues within the context of Van Gennep's initiatory model: our society is decreasingly effective in enacting the first stage of 'separation' from the family environment. It is only partially tolerant of – yet unwilling to guide or sanction – the second stage of liminal questing ('It's just a phase they're going through...'). And, for the third reintegrative phase, we leave our young people to the whims of popular culture, led by corporate interests who pay some of the sharpest minds on the planet incredible sums of money to advertise their products and create the illusion that *this next product* will bring fulfillment, and then this

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<sup>15</sup> Duane Elgin, 'Collective Consciousness and Cultural Healing', *Report to the Fetzer Institute*, October 1997, <http://www.awakeningearth.org>.

<sup>16</sup> Joanna Macy, 'Working Through Environmental Despair', in Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), pp. 240–62.

next one... and then this one.... And on we go, chasing individualistic wants. Our youth are confronted with mixed messages of, on the one hand, individuated maximizing of consumption, and on the other, the dangers of ecological degradation.

While many researchers, educators, law enforcers and lay public speak their concerns about the increase in ‘disaffected’ behaviour among adolescents today, I would argue that, upon broader reflection, it is our contemporary mainstream culture on the whole that is disaffected. The supra-personal meanings and worldviews that our culture is peddling have little to do with balance, harmony and community with the human and more-than-human world, and the consequences of this imbalance are beginning to show. As adolescents experience the powerful, archetypal impulses to form a new supra-personal identity within society, they are simultaneously confronted with an emerging common sense that the dominant cult of shallow consumerism and unregulated pursuit of individual wants might somehow be faulty.

### **Rediscovering Rites of Passage**

With an awareness that an increasing number of contemporary youth are acting out their own undirected, and often problematic initiatory journeys (e.g., drinking excessively, drug taking, fast driving, and unprotected sex), and with a deep concern for the well-being of *all* our relations in this world, my colleagues and I in the Guiding Spirit Leadership Development Program have set about developing and implementing a wilderness-based rites of passage model designed to facilitate a genuine initiatory experience for participants. Whereas many wilderness-based educational and therapeutic programs focus on personal development and improving self-esteem, we focus, additionally, on transpersonal development by helping people to experience a deep holistic/somatic awareness of their fundamental interconnection with all life. Our broader aim is to help people emerge as healthy, balanced adults who are able to embrace a wider, fuller reality of interdependence in a sustainable society.

Development of this idea began long before our core staff had met, as each of us had gone about our personal explorations of indigenous initiatory rituals from around the world. All of us had experimented extensively with drugs in our late teens and twenties (and one in his thirties). Some of us had experienced chemical or behavioural addictions. Some had served long-term prison sentences. Others had been through near death experiences that drastically altered our perception of reality. All of us, though, somehow or another, had managed to navigate through these experiences to discoveries of deeper growth, disciplines and health practices such as yoga, meditation, martial arts, and First Nations traditions such as the pipe ceremony, *yuwipi*, sundance, and vision quest. When it came time for us to gather and consider what were to be the essential ingredients of this program, we experienced a natural awareness of connotative similarity between these practices, and a fluid translation of the core elements in our experiences.

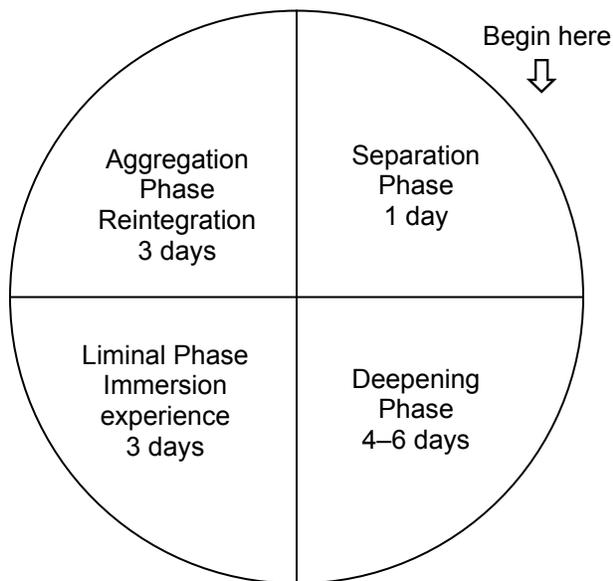
Specific development of this rites of passage model has been in evolution for over a decade now, stemming very much from the ‘solo’ experience in Rediscovery programs (one of the most successful eco-culturally based programs to emerge in the past twenty-three years). More recently, our model has evolved as an integral 8-day component of the Guiding Spirit Leadership Development Program – a ‘renaissance’ holistic guide-training program for educators, and Aboriginal community/youth workers. Presently, this model manifests itself in stand-alone ten-day programs for adolescent males (‘Grizzly Spirit’), adolescent females (‘New Moon’), and adults of all ages and backgrounds (‘Wolf Dreamers’), offered through Ghost River Rediscovery, Alberta. The model is also an integral component of the five-month ‘Youth Leadership Program’ offered through Ghost River Rediscovery, and the Guiding Spirit Leadership Development Program, offered through the Department of Child and Youth Care First Nations Program at Malaspina University-College, British Columbia, and the Institute for Child Rights and Development at the University of Victoria, BC.

For the next phase of this paper, we will review the rites of passage model, discussing

theoretical foundations in relation to common ingredients of age-old initiatory practices, and practical considerations for contemporary application.

### The Initiatory Journey

In developing the initiatory model we borrowed from Van Gennep's three stage model discussed above, but decided to add an additional *deepening* phase between separation and liminal. The following is a more detailed explanation of the different phases.



#### *Leaving the civilized world (separation)*

The participants' transition from a largely urban or rural farming area, along a bumpy dirt road to the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rocky Mountains – the final few kilometres of which they have to traverse along a river bed – brings them into a completely different environment in which they feel a long way from their known comfort zone. Electricity, heat, shelter, and many other taken-for-granted comforts and conveniences are abruptly left behind with participants' family and friends.

#### *The wilderness immersion (deepening)*

In traditional Aboriginal cultures, the difference between day-to-day living and ritualized ceremony can be interpreted to be indistinct. The sacred and the mundane are one and the same. Young people in these cultures grow up in a world where time is understood as cyclic and in tune with the natural rhythms of the land. They experience simple things such as day and night, the seasons, and the tides as a spiralling cycle rather than a linear progression. Space, instead of being measured in linear distance, is measured in experienced distance. One of the Elders we work with, Sequoyah Trueblood, conveys this while explaining the traditional use of the sweat lodge:

When our ancestors entered the sweat lodge it wasn't for any special sacred ritual – it was how they took their bath and cleaned their bodies. It was sacred to them because *everything* was sacred to them. We think of the sweat lodge now, as a special ritual only because we have lost touch with the one and only sacred ritual there is – *life!*<sup>17</sup>

When these young people are led from their familiar environment through an initiatory journey, they have already had a lifetime of cohesive learning in which trans-rational appreciation of the present is both practised and valued.

Because of this profound difference between the day-to-day mindset of modern culture and traditional Aboriginal culture, we felt it was important to add a distinct transitional phase during which time participants could gradually disengage from city life and immerse into the natural rhythm of wilderness before entering the full liminal phase. These few days of deepening bring an enlivening of the senses in which participants gradually open their awareness of new sounds, awesome sights, interesting textures, and different smells and tastes. They move away from sight dominated 'perspective' and begin experiencing the natural world in a 'timeless', more holistic, *felt sense*. In these

<sup>17</sup> Sequoyah Trueblood, personal communication, August 2002.

days leading up to the solos we engage in a number of growth disciplines, including sweat lodges, meditation, yoga, and morning rituals of greeting the sun and cleansing with a dunk in the ice-cold river. These practices help us to notice and let go of our blind, conditional reactions, helping us to deepen our acceptance of what is present. This combination of experiences, when participants are able to transcend their culturally defined experience of fragmented, compartmentalized, and desacralized time and space, opens them up to new and different levels of reality, preparing them for the deeper transformation to come.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Solos and vision quests (liminal experience)*

The solo, in which participants spend three days and nights alone on the land without food or significant shelter, is based on the traditional First Nations practice of vision quests, in which the initiate would retreat to the wilderness for long periods of isolation, fasting and meditation to receive a guiding vision or spirit guardian. Some native people still pursue vision quests as the highest form of their religion; when understood in this way, to even mention the practice out of its traditional context borders on heresy.<sup>19</sup> Given that many of our participants have not been raised and educated in the traditional cultural framework, we have adopted the *solo* experience, which still includes a spiritual focus, but within a less culturally specific modern framework. This three to four day experience of wilderness isolation involves a number of key ingredients:

*Induced discomfort* – Participants are placed in solo sites without food and a minimum of shelter and creature comforts. Sometimes, if they are feeling ambitious, they are placed in a circle that is too small to lie down in, and are instructed not to leave this circle for the entire period of three days and nights.

*Attention focusing* – While experiencing the growing discomfort, participants' minds will engage in a disparate array of distractions to escape the unwanted sensations. To help manage the discomfort and uncertainty, they will have been coached in methods of attention focusing. This may involve the continuous shaking of a rattle, singing of a song, rocking motions, or noticing breath and other bodily or environmental sensations.

As discomfort and uncertainty mount, many participants experience crises of courage. Given the situation, however, their best option is to redouble efforts to focus their attention and, in so doing, they eventually discover that once seemingly unavoidable discomfort can now be transcended. With this incredible new discovery, their capacity to focus their attention grows manifold and they are able to still their mind, opening it to deeper awareness of the environment within which they are immersed. With a reduction in conceptual thoughts comes greater awareness of subtle sensations, and participants begin to sense the material world at a deeper vibrational level.

With the dawning realization that they are going to be okay despite the lack of shelter and creature comforts, participants open up to a genuine familiarity with the land, and many of their deeper fears and hostilities dissolve. This is a truly liminal experience, with a transcendence of their previously learned capacity and the former boundaries of their personal identity. Some participants might also experience supernatural (meaning rationally inexplicable) sound, movement and light, as well as possibly the voice and/or image, and/or touch of ancestor beings or spirit guides.<sup>20</sup> In all cases, their felt sense of community is expanded to include a profound awareness of interconnection with life, elements and energies around them.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', in Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, pp. 122–35.

<sup>19</sup> Thom Henley, *Rediscovery: Ancient Pathways, New Directions* (Vancouver: Western Canada Wilderness Committee, 1989), p. 102.

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<sup>20</sup> Because past conditioning helps to define our perceptive boundaries, experiencing the presence of spirit beings tends to be contingent upon the cultural background, preparation and focused intent of each participant. Unless one has strong belief in the existence, or past experience of the presence of such beings, they tend not to manifest as such.

### *Return to base camp (early reintegration)*

The reintegrative process begins when participants are welcomed back from their solos into base camp. Their return into the camp environment is marked by ritual, signifying their transition to a new identification and level of understanding. A ‘give away’ circle in which each person offers a valued personal possession as a gift follows this ritual. By offering up this valued possession while still in a heightened state of awareness, participants can experience a profound letting go of narcissistic possessiveness, and in exchange, find the energy of generosity, sharing and interconnectedness as they reintegrate within a human community.<sup>21</sup> During the remaining few days after the solos, we stay mostly in camp and engage in sweat lodges, meditation, and yoga. By engaging in these growth disciplines during this time of heightened sensory awareness, participants are often able to re-access their transcendent awareness through experiences other than the intense solo. This helps them to realize the benefit of continuing to engage in these, or related practices once they have returned to their normal lives. As a core principle, we encourage them to pursue any practice that, through the direct experience of sensations in the body, helps to replace blind reactions with equanimity and awareness at the deepest habit pattern of the mind. These include most any martial art (especially the softer arts that involve grappling and/or subtle awareness of movement), health arts such as yoga and dance, meditations such as *vipassana*, and First Nations traditional practices such as sweat lodge, fasting, sundance, and related rituals and ceremonies.

### *Going home (reintegration)*

When participants finally return to ‘civilization’, they carry with them not only memories of a wonderful time in the bush, but also a deeply felt sense of their fundamental interconnection with the natural world. Participants also come away with a support

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<sup>21</sup> Many participants comment afterwards that this ‘give away’ has been one of the most deeply moving experiences of their life.

network of friends and staff whom they can call upon in times of need, and a tool kit of already experienced growth disciplines and health practices to help them continue on their journey. Most important, they come away with a many-layered sense of community and belonging and a realization that liminal experiences can be accessed by means far healthier than drugs, and far more life affirming than violent gang ritual, promiscuous sex and fast cars.

### **Other Key Ingredients**

#### *Experience in wilderness*

One ingredient common to most any indigenous rite of passage is experience in wilderness.<sup>22</sup> In this environment, success and failure are not measured in the terms of a driven society or peer assessment, but in terms of very basic, tangible, and potent life instincts. For contemporary youth especially, this environment can provide a necessary and unforgiving reality check with deeply felt consequences. For example, if participants do not take the time and effort to set up a tarp properly, they might find themselves soaking wet and freezing after a surprise night rainstorm. They might complain and blame the weather for a while, but, sure enough, the next night their tarp is bombproof. Whatever dysfunctional and maladaptive behaviours may have worked for them in an urban environment are quickly transformed by very real, visceral and primal instincts to ‘be well’. In order to ensure protection from rain, the shelter must be built. In this sense, wilderness is a leaderless teacher; when participants are able to exercise their intelligence autonomously, and make choices based on personal interest, their struggle turns to natural evolution, and the personal transformations that occur arise from their interactive exchange with the elements. The motivation to improve emerges from within, rather than being imposed

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<sup>22</sup> I define ‘wilderness’ as the minimally modified or unmodified more-than-human world. The less we have altered this natural environment, the more likely (for the most part) it will have developed into complex, biodiverse ecosystems of synergistic balance.

by an external authority structure applying extrinsic motivators such as mandatory attendance, required courses, and competitive assigning of grades.<sup>23</sup>

### *Humility*

Raised as most of us were in Western society, our staff members are acutely aware of our capacity for *not* 'noticing' that which we have not been equipped to notice. With evidence of many Western anthropologists having made epistemological assumptions that limited their capacity to perceive the essence of indigenous ritual practices, we dare not assume we are free of subconscious judgements trickling in from our dualistically trained rational intellect. Our staff members all know the experience of presuming that we have understood what was essential in ritual and what was superfluous, only to discover later (through a deepening in consciousness) that our assessments had been shallow and erroneous. How are we to know if this is not still the case? Ultimately, what helps us the most in this process is coming to it with a great humility, without which we would not have gained the trust and guidance of Elders, mystics and healers who have tolerated our accidental prejudice and helped us along the way.

### *Elders*

The traditional Elders we work with all live healthy, balanced lives, and understand better than anyone the importance of having clear energy and intent around the highly sensitized and vulnerable initiates. These people include: Cherokee Choctaw Elder Sequoyah Trueblood – an internationally respected ceremonialist, mystic and healer who works closely with Kogi Mamas, Hopi, and other Elders around the world; Salish Elder Agnes Pierre – who serves on a number of national councils (including RCMP) as an advisor on Aboriginal issues; Metis (Cree) Elder Christine Joseph – who has run women's shelters for over 40 years, and has been a counsellor for Rediscovery for over 10

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<sup>23</sup> Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', pp. 122–35.

years; and Cree Elder Albert Daigneault – respected throughout the north as a powerful medicine man, Mishum (Grandfather) works with anyone who seeks his help, including terminally ill patients (referred by regional hospitals) whose healing he is often able to facilitate. We also work with a number of younger cross-cultural specialists, including: Susan Powell (Lakota) – who has traveled the world studying traditional health practices, drawing connections back to those of her own culture; Bboy Daigneault (Cree) – raised in two worlds, Bboy continues learning the traditional medicine practices of his father while practicing *hatha* yoga, meditations, and working with people of many cultures; and Georgina Rollins (Nakota) – raised by her grandparents, Georgina has a deep familiarity with the land on which we travel.

While the forms of their teachings will vary, these people have a deep connection with their traditional ways of knowing, and a common appreciation of trans-cultural issues. Many of their prayers and ritual practices are engaged to invoke the assistance of helper spirits and to ensure our healthy alignment in the ever-manifesting subtle field of causality. These people understand, from their own extensive experience, the trans-rational dimensions of consciousness that our initiates are being exposed to, and they make every effort to facilitate optimal conditions for the journey. The stories, advice and rituals they provide are often steeped in metaphor, enabling initiates in the process of re-integrative framing, meaning-making, and the transferring of learning to many aspects of their lives. Sometimes, though, the Elders' teachings are not meant to be understood right away, but rather, are planted as seeds and nutrients to help people grow more aware of our relationship with the natural world. And it is only when we have this 'aha!' of consciousness that comes to fruition days, weeks, months, or years (maybe even lifetimes) later, that we begin to realize the embedded nature of their caring intent all along. The incredible depth of knowledge that our Elders bring to these programs cannot be learned from a book, or in a university... but only through their deep life-commitment to these practices. The wisdom they provide is invaluable.

## Meaning-making

In our programs, we are acutely aware of the effect our conceptual framing and metaphorization will have on our initiates, and we make every effort to ensure that our teachings are grounded in values of all-inclusive kindness, empathy and compassion. During reintegration, initiates are inevitably reflecting, processing and making sense of the new levels of reality they have just experienced. When helping them to engage this process we endeavour to discuss their experiences – especially those of transcendent resonance – in as broad a cross-cultural context as possible. We offer perspectives on Holy Spirit (Christian), Brahmic plane (Hinduism), *Nirvana* (Buddhism), and explain principles of *ki*, *chi*, *prana*, *kundalini*, and loving Consciousness, found in a variety of non-Western philosophies. We also make mention of how these concepts can relate to emerging scientific understandings of sub-atomic physics. The Elders speak of this in terms of everyone and everything being our relations, including all our ancestors, whose atoms now move through us.

Beyond these efforts to offer a wide selection of concepts, stories and metaphors, we do little else to prescribe meaning for our initiates. Instead of working towards specific conceptual consolidations and developmental outcomes, we trust instead that we have triggered an ongoing process of psycho/spiritual discovery. Joseph Campbell, the well-known authority on comparative mythology, offers some wisdom on the matter:

Creative mythology... springs not, like theology, from the dicta of authority, but from the insights, sentiments, thought and vision of an adequate individual, loyal to his own experience of value. Thus it corrects the authority holding to the shells of forms produced and left behind by lives once lived. Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial creative fire of the becoming thing that is no thing at all but life, not as it will be or as it should be, as it was or as it

never will be, but as it is, in depth, in process, here and now, inside and out.<sup>24</sup>

## Learning Process

We believe that a person learns best when the mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional dimensions are engaged in a whole and balanced manner.<sup>25</sup> This includes a balanced valuation of both ‘imposed/transmitted knowledge’ (e.g., Elder teachings, conceptual academic material and lectures, book knowledge) and ‘emergent knowledge’ (e.g., tracking and elucidating what arises from participants’ own embodied sense of experience). With the latter, we are also mindful that we are not too narrowly focused on rational translation of these tacit/intuitive dawnings. This is not to devalue cognitive meaning making – yes, let’s have lots! But, in a sense, we must be careful not to dwell (as most modern educators do) in this mode of knowing, which at times means purposefully *not* focusing here.

The principal ambition of our educational process is the empowerment of people in their own lives. Yet much of what disempowers people is their conditioned reliance on ‘expert knowledge’ held and delivered by those in authority. All too often in our modern culture, this expert knowledge is delivered in the currency and realm of rational cognition, which, in effect, creates a narrowly recognized knowledge-economy that can be used as a means (intentionally or not) of gate-keeping the means to a learner’s self-worth. This kind of rational processing is worth learning, of course, but we are mindful of the relative (e.g., complete) emphasis it is given in most contemporary educational settings. We prefer instead to help participants find ways to access direct awareness, and notice and value their own tacit emergence – *without* necessarily inducing (that which is pre/sub-rational) or reducing (that which is trans-rational) to rational, descriptive expression. In this way, we can deeply empower learners, encouraging their

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), pp. 7–8.

<sup>25</sup> A. Pattel-Gray, *Through Aboriginal Eyes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), p. 4.

curiosity to learn creatively and identify with the sacred through various states of consciousness.

Our overall challenge, then, lies in striking a healthy balance among the perennial wisdoms of Elder teachings, contemporary academics, and initiates' valuation of their own experiential awakening.

### **Problematic Issues**

As wonderful and powerful as this initiatory rites of passage experience can be, there are a number of problematic issues that can arise. For the remainder of this paper, we shall explore what I perceive to be the most troublesome, and consider ways to effective resolution.

#### *Reintegrative troubles*

During the reintegrative stage, a number of problems can arise. Upon returning back into the 'civilized' world, participants often report initial feelings of novelty and euphoria, but find that these feelings can fade within hours or days to be replaced by a heavy fatigue and sometimes depression. This condition is often referred to as being 'bushed', which is an unfortunate misnomer in that it implies it is our time in the wilderness that has worn us out and from which we must now recover. An alternate (and in my opinion, more accurate) explanation is that our consciousness, which has fully opened and immersed in a harmonious natural environment, returns to a culture laden with forces that have split consciousness from nature in the first place. In the painful 're-entry' experience, we *feel* our newly opened and connected beings congeal into hardened, separate, well-defended selves.<sup>26</sup> The open, expressive, and relatively unfiltered awareness is quickly assaulted by mechanical noise, hurried schedules and the cloistered or expressed angst of people living *koyanasqatsi*.<sup>27</sup> Inevitably, one must recalibrate one's armour.

It is worth noting that in most traditional indigenous cultures, the reintegrative process is highly regulated, with an extended phase of actively supervising the returning initiates. This

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<sup>26</sup> Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', p.133.

<sup>27</sup> This is the Hopi word for 'life out of balance'.

process is endorsed by the community, and is managed by cultural specialists whose role it is to ensure that the initiates are both guided and protected during this vulnerable stage. For example, in Coast Salish culture, the 'Winter Dance' initiate will remain in seclusion in the wilderness for at least a month after the liminal phase, bathing in the icy-cold stream each morning and focusing intently in prayers and ritual and specifically mindful activities. The only people the initiate can speak with are guides and Elders whose duty it is to monitor the initiate's progress and help keep the initiate's new identity clear of dangerous spirits and energies.<sup>28</sup>

While reintegrating and living again within our fast-paced, competitive culture, we must find ways to nurture and protect this newer expanded consciousness. This is the *crux* of the reintegrative process, for if initiates are unsuccessful here, they will face an intense cognitive dissonance between an amazing new depth of life and a 'normal' culture that is blind to it. Without ways of reinforcing their experience, initiates will eventually feel a need to either devalue the new awareness in order to 'fit in' again, or feel alienated and confused.

#### *The quick-fix mentality*

One of the most troublesome and dissonance-inducing forces our initiates are confronted with upon return to modern society is the sheer pervasiveness of the *quick-fix* mentality. The idea of seeking spiritual transformation through an arduous journey or persistent practice of growth disciplines runs anathema to the prevailing influence of our consumer culture, which is driven by principles of instant gratification and maximization of comfort. A striking example of this contradiction is evidenced in the burgeoning popularity of yoga in contemporary North American society. Originating in India, yoga was developed as a system of psycho/physical spiritual and philosophical disciplines designed to bring about a profound transformation in the person through the transcendence of the ego.

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<sup>28</sup> William White (Salish Elder and cultural specialist), personal communication, October 2001.

Yet, as Indologist Georg Feurstein suggests, the purpose of most modern interpretations of these disciplines has been diminished to:

enhancing one's self-image, becoming better at playing the ego game, rather than recognizing that it is in a place beyond all that, and beyond any particular talents or skills that we might develop, that the whole wonderful area of genuine spirituality really lies. Genuine spirituality is about transcending the very thing we are so fond of, which is our personality. This is and has always been the traditional approach, and it is exceedingly demanding. And because very few people in our society are prepared to hear this, what has happened by and large is that these teachings have been butchered in order to better suit our consumerist mentality – which has to do with getting something very quickly, applying it, and feeling better about ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

When the transformational initiatory practices are undertaken in earnest, a number of discomforts – even terror – will sooner or later arise, as shadowy fears are exposed. Right about this time, however, is when we begin to think, 'Hmmm, this is getting ugly, must not be for me', and step back to dabbling, or move on to another flavour-of-the-day health practice. This influence of this cultural norm can be enough to deter people from (re) accessing transcendent dimensions of reality.

Given the prevalence of this comfort-seeking ethos in our North American culture, many parents and educators cannot fathom our reasons for wanting to engage such an arduous initiatory process in the first place. So, we are stuck in a kind of catch twenty-two. In order to guide our participants through genuinely transformative liminal experiences, we face the potential of hostile misinterpretation in the eyes of an increasingly litigious society. In designing and implementing initiatory rites of passage experiences, it becomes all too easy to slip into habits of parodying a genuinely transformative

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<sup>29</sup> Georg Feurstein, 'To Light a Candle in a Dark Age', *What is Enlightenment?* (Fall/Winter 1997), p. 37.

process by backing off and resorting to a less demanding level of ritual practice. Sadly, this often translates into *entertaining* ourselves with practices that are meant to transform.

### *Paradigmatic concerns*

I believe that much of our society's inability to comprehend the ontology of our programming stems from the metaphorical use of language that currently encodes our perspectives, experiences and cultural assumptions.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to most traditional Aboriginal cultures, our Western worldviews are constrained by paradigms that separate subject from object, the human from the non-human, and the animate from inanimate. Our language is filled with nouns and possessives (my, your, his, her...) that perpetuate this conceptual fragmentation of knowledge, and render difficult the task of explicating alternate ways of perceiving the world. Consequently, we find ourselves in a double bind whereby the epistemic codes embedded in the language determine the limits and direction that our educational empowerment can take.<sup>31</sup> By focusing on the development of rational, uni-state consciousness, with the inherent assumption that *mind* is a function of individuated entities, we limit ourselves, inevitably, to an impoverished disconnection from the holistic breadth and depth of multifold consciousness and inter-relational experience.

The only Western theoretical paradigm that seems holistic and comprehensive enough to include liminal experiences, supra-personal identification and sacred connections is the *transpersonal*. As Thomas Roberts and Frances Vaughan-Clark, two of the founders of the modern transpersonal movement explain:

The development of a comprehensive educational psychology requires a theoretical framework which includes all the phenomena related to human learning, and must therefore include areas of human

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<sup>30</sup> C.A. Bowers, *Critical Essays: Education, Modernity, and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), p. 109.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

experience which previously have been ignored by traditional academic psychology...

An underlying assumption of transpersonal psychology is that physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth are interrelated, and the optimal educational environment stimulates and nurtures the intuitive as well as the rational, the imaginative as well as the practical, and the creative as well as the receptive functions of each individual. Transpersonal psychology has focused attention on the human capacity for self-transcendence as well as self-realization, and is concerned with the optimum development of consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

More recently, Vaughan, together with Roger Walsh, has offered important distinctions between the *multistate* nature of transpersonal disciplines and the predominantly *unistate* disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and education, which

are centered in, and focus on, a single state of consciousness – namely our usual waking state – and accord significantly less attention and importance to alternate states.

By contrast, multistate cultures accord more attention and value to states such as dreams and contemplation and therefore derive significant parts of their worldviews from multiple states. Examples of such multistate enterprises include shamanic tribal cultures, Buddhist psychology, and Taoist philosophy. ...Contemporary transpersonal disciplines are attempts to forge modern multistate disciplines to bring the understanding, expression, and induction of transpersonal experiences and phenomena to the modern world and to combine the best of

ancient and cross-cultural wisdom with contemporary disciplines.<sup>33</sup>

Exactly what correlation this bears to the greater inclusion of trans-rational paradigms and rites of passage practices in our educational counselling systems is difficult to say. However, one would hope that, with mounting evidence of the efficacy of well-designed and implemented wilderness-based rites of passage programs, the academic community, institutional administrations, and funding bodies will warm up to the transpersonal principles that inform much of our way of knowing in these programs.

#### *Dangers of engaging liminality*

It is necessary now to focus on what I believe to be the core danger that leads to most abuses – intentional and accidental – of the initiatory process.

When an initiate enters the liminal state, he or she is opening to levels of consciousness beyond the familiar rational waking-state, often involving transcendent awareness of subtler, vibrational levels of reality. This can be an incredibly powerful experience during which the initiate's identity, values and worldview become prone to any re-association. In all instances, this trans-rational experience, however fleeting, can be construed to confirm the ethical principles of the path that one is on. This is not automatically a bad thing, nor is it automatically healthy. Unless the initiates are equipped with a healthy ethical base and rational meaning-making skills, such experiences can be horribly misguided and misinterpreted.

I believe the root of this problem lies in the failure to discern between conceptual thought with which we frame and make meaning of our experience, and non-conceptual awareness that brings us deeper into the direct experience. While these different levels of mental activity can appear to be one, our mind can flicker back and forth between these states up to forty times per second.<sup>34</sup> At a grosser level, these modes of

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Roberts and Frances Vaughan-Clark, 'Transpersonal Psychology in Education', *Phi Delta Kappan Educational Foundation*, fastback (53) (1975), p. 7.

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<sup>33</sup> Walsh and Vaughan, eds., *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> This distinction between mental states was first brought to my attention during my first *vipassana*

activity have seemingly merged, but they are still, epistemologically speaking, *distinct*. Without mindful discernment, these states can appear continuous, much like the fluid imagery perceived by a film projector flashing a rapid-fire sequence of images. And herein lies the danger. Whatever conceptual and ethical principles have been aligned to frame the transcendent experience can be mistaken for pure, direct, impersonal experience. One's tacit emergences, however seemingly pure, are vulnerable to the influence of conceptual imprinting. This erroneous correlation can then serve as a powerful confirmation of whatever (conceptual) *truth* the initiatory guides are peddling.

Because of this danger, I believe it is crucial that we (leaders of initiatory processes) endeavour to help our initiates discern between conceptual thought and non-conceptual, direct awareness. In this way, we can minimize the likelihood of people forming abusive or exclusionary associations from their liminal experiences. Furthermore, our practices must be engaged with compassion and be grounded in an ethical base of inclusive kindness. We must be mindful of the imprinting that our teachings, energy, and intent (both conscious and subconscious) will have on our initiates. From this place of self-awareness, we must also be vigilant about discouraging others who are abusing initiatory processes with exclusionary motives, realizing that any attempts to mould our (personal and collective) selves as exclusively separate from the totality, will only perpetuate fragmentation in our destabilizing world.

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retreat a number of years ago. The instructors were adamant that we make every effort to discern between different levels of mental activity. Many scientific studies of meditative states identify numerous categories of brain-wave cycles ranging from higher speed 'alpha' (around forty cycles per second), to 'theta' (around three cycles per second) and slower. One of our Elders, Sequoyah Trueblood, speaks of attaining zero cycles per second, which he describes as undistorted communication and undifferentiated oneness with Creator/Loving Consciousness.

## Concluding Remarks

While many educators, counsellors, and concerned researchers hold a genuine concern for the growing plight of our young people, most continue to advocate only for minor adjustments in our educational and/or socio-political systems. Very few have identified the need for officially sanctioned, fundamentally transformative initiatory rites of passage that enable us to recalibrate the way we perceive and construct reality. While many adults are unfamiliar with techniques of inner transformation, and would prefer not to engage in this liminal realm with such permeable trans-rational boundaries and questionable navigational guidelines, much evidence indicates that these initiatory processes are at play, regardless of our rational volition to ignore them. Drug use, promiscuous sex, extreme sports, gang violence – all are signs of engagement in liminal experience, however unconscious and haphazard this may be.

As concerned Elders, educators and counsellors, it is clearly within the scope of our activity to responsibly engage in, and guide our young people through the trans-rational realms of liminality, transcendence, and related multiple states of consciousness. Initiatory rites of passage experiences in wilderness environments offer a doorway to these realms, and evoke an opportunity for genuine transformation in which we can (re) discover our sacred inter-relation with all life and consciousness. Through purposefully induced, liminal experiences and mindfully guided conceptual framing, we can expand our identity *beyond* our personal sense of self, and engage an inner journey of growth and expanding kindness (*kind, kinder, kindred*) with all existence. By embracing these initiatory practices, and mixing a wholesome essence of both 'new' and 'old', Western and non-Western, scientific and indigenous ways of knowing, we can offer contemporary rites of passage to a wider audience, and draw a new picture in an ancient pattern of original teachings.

Finally (and foremost) is the matter of what I myself can do. Those of us who would guide young people on profound personal and transpersonal journeys in wilderness settings must embody a range of skills and sensitivities,

experiences and understanding that take great care and dedication to develop. The extent to which we can understand and appreciate the ritualized experience of our participants depends very much upon the extent of our own experience of these ritual practices and their resulting altered states. With this in mind, our responsibility as Elders, counsellors, educators, mentors and guides becomes immense. To help young people realize a change into adulthood in a sustainable, compassionate, society we must first *be* the vehicle for and embodiment of such change, which starts (and continues in each moment) with ourselves becoming what it is we ought to be. This is no small undertaking.

I would like to conclude this paper with a remark by Michael Hull that is at once inspiring and cautionary. Hull, as the first white man ever authorized to lead the traditional Lakota sundance ceremony, has a clear sense of what is at stake:

I believe that we stand on the precipice of great possibility. Public willingness to consider alternative ways of building loving healthy communities and relationships is growing – and the need has never been greater. We who are responsible for the gifts of the spirit have an opportunity to help create a passionate world filled with relatives who are kind and good mannered – a world that is divine centered, love based, and compassion driven. Failure of personal integrity is the fastest way to waste the opportunity. Let's not screw it up.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Hull, 'Walking the Red Road: Learning to Caretake the Gifts of the Spirit', *Shaman's Drum*, No. 59 (2001), p. 57.

## Eastern Buddhism and Western Ethics: An Interview with Robert Florida

Steve Bentheim

An interview with Robert E. Florida, Emeritus Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. He took early retirement from Brandon University, where he was Professor of Religion and Dean of Arts, at the end of December 1999. Most of his recent publication has been in the area of



Fig. 1: Robert Florida

Buddhist ethics, particularly health care ethics. He has a Ph.D. in Religion from McMaster University and has done extra work on Buddhism at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado; at the East–West Centre at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu; and at Mahidol University in Bangkok. As a participant observer, he has experience in Thai, Tibetan, and Zen Buddhist communities.

Dr. Florida is presently working on a book for Greenwood Press on Buddhism and Human Rights. Interested readers could consult his chapter on Buddhism and abortion in Damien Keown's *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (London: Curzon, 2000).

Steve Bentheim (SB): Your focus is on Buddhism and ethics. Unlike Western religious traditions, Buddhism is without a central leadership. Can we identify Buddhism in a central way?

Robert Florida (RF): Probably not. My focus is to take general principles cited in cultural, historical, or personal context. One cannot talk about them in the abstract, but try to locate them in place and time.

SB: So we are focusing both on historical and contemporary aspects of Buddhism as practised worldwide?

RF: Yes.

SB: Is the conception of 'ethics' one that is taken from any specific Western model or theorists?

RF: No, ethics as it is generally understood.

SB: In early Indian Buddhist society, was there both a religious and social order?

RF: Well, the Buddha came into an existing social order and did not try to change it. He was not trying to change the order but was critical of it. He withdrew and set up a separate social order, a monastic community that was dependent on the larger community. This was going on concurrently with other religious movements. *Shramana* are withdrawn ascetics, world renouncers.

SB: The Buddhist model of an ideal social ruler – the '*dharmachakra* king' (wheel–turning king) – was this an ideal solely in India or did it travel wherever Buddhism went?

RF: It became the model and the dominant model in Southeast Asia.

SB: Would you describe the model for us?

RF: The king doesn't rule by force of arms, but by righteousness and by following the *dharm*a. By his example, people will not use excessive force and will live according to the *dharm*a.

SB: This sounds needed in today's world, too. In Buddhist countries, would it have been the role

of monks to advise or chastise the king or rulers to follow this ideal?

RF: In general, Buddhist monks were to keep a safe distance from the rulers, but they were to teach if asked. This has remained so today.

SB: In your study of Buddhism in Japan in the late nineteenth century, during the Meiji Dynasty, you stipulate that Buddhist teachers influenced the Emperor to make war on other lands.

RF: They collaborated. The emperor was more a figurehead and it was the architects of the modern state that declared war. After the United States had opened Japan in the 1850s the Meiji Restoration modernized, and in 1895 they fought the Chinese, and in 1905 they beat the Russians. This was all prior to the Second World War. Brian Victoria has most recently brought this into focus. In Sri Lanka, the problem with the Tamils was formulated with Buddhist idealogues as a 'holy war' for a 'purer' Buddhism.

SB: Would you attribute the opening of Japan by the United States as a Western influence directly influencing Buddhist clergy?

RF: The Buddhists were never pacifistic in Japan. Monks in Japan have gone to war from time to time.

SB: So somewhere, Buddhism changed the model of the *dharmachakra* king.

RF: When clergy began to meddle with affairs of state, such as in Sri Lanka and Japan, things turned awry.

SB: Not unlike our Western legacy of the marriage of church and state.

RF: These comparisons are not easy to make. It's hard enough to understand what's going on in each Buddhist country.

SB: Another area of ethical interest has been your writing on women's rights in Buddhist countries.

RF: Buddhism doesn't try to radically reform society, but on the whole, where they've had influence, the status of women was improved from what had been previously. They have a much better record than their non-Buddhist neighbours in Asia.

SB: If Buddhism primarily focused on monastic observance, how did this impact householder-women?

RF: It gave them an option other than being a wife and mother – to become a nun, which I believe was liberating. Nuns were always the spiritual equals of monks, and their enlightenment was acknowledged from the beginning.

SB: You've also noted in your book that under Buddhism women could choose not to marry at all.

RF: This was an especially emancipating position in China.

SB: What are some current ethical issues in Buddhist countries?

RF: The same as in the West: economic development, social justice, health care and reproduction, the status of women, war and violence.

SB: Are there any Western ethical frameworks that are hard for people to accept as Buddhists?

RF: Yes. Traditional Buddhists had no concept of human rights, one of the cornerstones of modern Western life.

SB: Has Buddhism an ethical offering for the West?

RF: I think it's best not to apply foreign models on each other. It's very difficult. In 1927, the first book on ethics in Buddhism was published by Tachibana. It was always seen more as a practice than a theory.

SB: That seems similar to the practice of *li* (kindness) in Confucianism. Alan Watts has often compared Eastern and Western spirituality.

In *Psychotherapy East and West* he speaks of his understanding of Buddhism as “liberation from the *maya* [illusoriness] of social institutions and not of the physical world.”<sup>1</sup> He presents his use of Zen Buddhism as a way to see through social relations to one's true nature – does this conform, say, to your understanding of Buddhism?

RF: All schools of Buddhism have a notion of two levels of truth – the first level is the penetrating insight into the ultimate nature of things, and sees things as they really are – and from that level the temporal things are not as important – one must see through them. But the second level of truth is that there is some truth in the temporal realm – certain kinds of hierarchies and structures are necessary for human survival.

Buddhists were never social radicals. To take a concrete example, the Buddhists did not try to eradicate slavery in India, nor did the later Buddhists, yet they said a lot about treating subordinates with fairness and decency.

SB: We in the West are only emerging out of slavery ourselves, just some five generations back.

RF: In 1874, Thailand began the abolishment of slavery – so there's not much difference, time wise. But if you read Western writers who lived in Siam in the nineteenth century, they almost always comment that slaves were almost always treated better there than slaves in the West.

SB: Might you attribute this to the racial and religious laws in Western civilization, that might not have existed in the Far East?

RF: Yes, to some extent. Slavery in Buddhist countries was never based on race – it was most commonly from debt, or else war captives, or by court action for extreme debts. Some were ‘redeemable slaves’, others were non-redeemable, whose descendants would remain slaves.

SB: Could slaves join a Buddhist order?

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West* (New York: Ballantine, 1969), p. 63.

RF: No, the Buddha ruled that slaves, criminals, or those with incurable diseases could not join the order. The idea was that those with strong social obligations could not join to get away from them – they would need permission. However, of interest to me was that once in an order, everyone – whether a former butcher or an ex-king, was treated equally.

SB: Returning to Western ethics, a contemporary moral theorist, Carol Gilligan, does not focus on the taking of an ethical stance mainly on universal rights, duty and justice, as Kohlberg does, but on the more particular stance of “caring and responsibility toward others.” Does this resonate with Buddhist principles or practice?

RF: Well, yes – it's the very absolute core of Buddhist ethical thought; taking care of others. Mahāyāna Buddhism talks of taking care of others – ‘exchanging self for others’ – giving up one's selfish interests for all other beings.

SB: Is that the *bodhisattva* vow?

RF: That's part of it.

SB: From a Western perspective, do you see an aspect of egoism in choosing to negate oneself and to be the last to be saved, as is invoked in the *bodhisattva* vow?<sup>2</sup>

RF: It could be, but not if done right. I suppose it's one of the dangers.

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<sup>2</sup> The following is an example of the *bodhisattva* vow as recited in one school of Japanese Buddhism. This vow is often lengthier, but very similar in all schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

“Though the many beings are numberless,  
I vow to save them;  
though greed, hatred, and ignorance rise endlessly,  
I vow to cut them off,  
though the Dharma is vast and fathomless;  
I vow to understand it;  
though Buddha's way is beyond attainment;  
I vow to embody it fully.”

Robert Aiken, *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), p. 62.

SB: What I'm asking by this, for those who are situated in Western ego-psychology is to underscore the developmental importance of boundaries between self and other.

RF: One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is that all beings are co-dependent and co-produced from their very essence, so there is no boundary between self and other, so they will not truly be egoistic.

SB: Could one then say that their own self is included with other selves?

RF: Buddhists would be more likely to say, there is no difference.

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Dr. Florida may be contacted at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, at the University of Victoria, for the 2002-03 academic year.

## *Dastafshani (Ecstasy): The Art of S. Mohammad Ehsaey*

Leslie Stanick



Fig. 1: *Dastafshani* series, yellow gouache, black enamel. on mat board. 50x70 cm

*A review of an exhibition of contemporary Islamic calligraphy as abstract painting by S. Mohammad Ehsaey at the Ziba Art Gallery, Vancouver, February 9 – March 7, 2002.*

It is a gift of grace, when on rare occasion, one encounters a visual expression that pierces the veils of the heart, revealing a direct experience of Truth. S. Mohammad Ehsaey is a master calligrapher and graphic artist from Iran. His exhibit, *Dastafshani (Ecstasy)*, is a unique blend of Islamic calligraphy and contemporary abstract painting produced as a deeply personal spiritual practice and visual expression of *zikr*, or ‘remembrance of God’. His paintings are an expression of his profound love of God; an intimate dialogue, from the innermost depths of the heart, with the Beloved. The artwork remains as a calligraphic icon, inviting us back to the centre of our being, to the living essence of the Divine residing in our own hearts.

Ehsaey uses the name of God, Allah [الله], and the utterance, ‘la ilaha illa Allah’ [لا إله إلا الله], generally interpreted as, ‘there is no god but God’, as both the form and content of his painted *zikr*. His work becomes both process and icon, praise and call to *zikr*, remembrance and

reminder, and a profound visible embodiment of the Sacred Word.<sup>1</sup>

A *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad states, “For everything there is a polish which takes away rust, and the polish of the heart is *zikr*.”<sup>2</sup> The word, *zikr*, refers to remembrance of God through the repetition of the divine names and certain phrases which invite union with the Beloved.<sup>3</sup> In the view of Seemi Ghazi, a scholar of Arabic:

*Zikr* is invoking, recalling and remembering our divine beginning and our divine end, and the moments of divine breath in between. The purpose is to actualize, harmonize and balance the qualities of the divine names within the self and within creation, by invoking them silently, upon the breath and with tone.<sup>4</sup>

For Ehsaey, remembrance has become a transformative visual practice, which has awakened in him a state of self-surrender and freedom.

I had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Ehsaey about the creation of the *Dastafshani* series, and his personal process of artistic and spiritual unfoldment that informs his unique expressions of the Sacred Word. Fred Shoai, owner of the Ziba Gallery, translated our conversation between Farsi and English, and offered insights into Ehsaey’s work and contemporary Iranian Islamic art. He explained

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<sup>1</sup> My phrasing here is indebted to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 17.

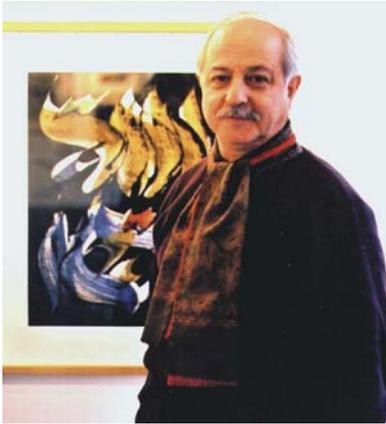
<sup>2</sup> Coleman Barks and Michael Green, *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis* (New York: Ballantine Wellspring, 2000), p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Seemi Ghazi, personal communication, November 2002.

that the exhibit's title derives from the Farsi words, *dast*, meaning hand, and *afshan*, spreading, suggesting the hands of the heart opened in celebration, praise and thanksgiving, reflective of Ehsaey's ecstatic paintings. The series was created between 1996 and 2002. All of the sixty-nine paintings are untitled, and together form the resounding voice of a passionate *zīkr* of Allah.

Mohammad Ehsaey has been writing the divine name as his life work for over fifty years.



Photograph: S. Mohammad Ehsaey at the Ziba Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2002

He says, "Calligraphy has been the artistic core of my soul for as long as I remember." Born in Tehran in 1940, his talent for calligraphy was encouraged as a child, and by the age of eighteen, he already was highly regarded as a master calligrapher and teacher. He later studied painting and graphic design at the University of Tehran, where he was also teaching calligraphy. With the encouragement of Mr. Parviz Tanavoli, renowned Iranian sculptor, as well as mentor and friend, Ehsaey began his quest to develop a direct and spontaneous expression of Allah using calligraphy as the expressive medium. His experimentation led to the creation of a new genre of painting which he calls *khat-naghashi*, meaning in Farsi, 'letters and painting', or 'painted script'. What has emerged over the past thirty years is a vibrant, visual expression of the artist's intimate conversations with the Beloved.

Since its revelation, the Quran has been treasured as the direct word of God, and calligraphers have been held in the highest esteem as transmitters of the Sacred Word. Decorative calligraphy of the Quran and poetic texts is incorporated into ceramics, architecture, books, painting, tile and metal work, and textiles. The script has become an art form which can be used anywhere, and an invitation

to see God in every direction.<sup>5</sup> As such, the calligraphic form of the Name functions as a visual aid to the development of spiritual life, and is used as a method for realizing the Named.<sup>6</sup>

Ehsaey's calligraphic skill and artistry is renowned throughout Iran and the Islamic world; his monumental ceramic murals of Quranic texts grace the walls of the Islamic University of Theology and the al Ghadir mosque in Tehran, as well as the Iranian Embassy in Abu Dhabi. He teaches graphic design and calligraphy at the University of Tehran, and continues to play a central role in the development of the arts in Iran through the museum and cultural communities. His work is widely exhibited around the world, including Vancouver, where *Dastafshani* was enthusiastically received.

Having mastered the forms and rules of calligraphy, Ehsaey has endeavored to free himself from constraint through the deliberate loss of technical control, trading the fine reed pen for the wide and thin edges of a putty knife. Working spontaneously, he begins by painting the word Allah or the phrase 'la ilaha illa Allah', in Arabic script, in bold, fluid strokes of colour – vermilion, cadmium yellow, prussian blue – on mat board. The image is then covered with a specially prepared black, enamel paint. Ehsaey has less than a minute to inscribe the word Allah into the wet, black surface before it hardens, removing the viscous paint in sweeping strokes with a putty knife. The result is an undulating window in the form of the word Allah, through which Allah is revealed in luminous colour, like an inner reality, radiating from beneath [Fig. 2]. The process is suggestive of 'polishing the face of the heart', cleansing the heart of impurities and removing the layers of darkness that obscure it, revealing divine essence, the light of Allah, shining from within.<sup>7</sup>

Through the black of deep, timeless space, the void, the words Allah, or 'la ilaha il la

<sup>5</sup> Markus Hattstein, 'Islam – World Religion and Cultural Power', pp. 8–33 in Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius, eds., *Islam: Art and Architecture* (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Barks and Green, *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis*, p. 46.

Allah', blaze from the inscription, with accents of scarlet, vermillion, and ochre [Fig. 3]. The work is fresh, immediate and elegant. Swooping lines with smooth, clean edges unfurl in joyous exaltation, while the vertical strokes are fluid and graceful, alive like the tips of flames [see Fig. 1]. Overlapping the inscribed words with the brushstrokes of colour beneath creates an impression of depth and mystery, a poetic play of light and shadow suggestive of veils, and 'hidden treasure', longing to be known [Fig. 4].<sup>8</sup>

The artist confided that some of his favourite pieces are rendered in subtle pastel tints, just whispers of colour, covered with white or cream enamel, which evoke gentleness and peace. Several energetic brush and ink paintings in black and white [Fig. 5], repeat the name Allah in a dynamic burst of energy. Considering his brushes as extensions of his body, Ehsaey says that creating these gestural pieces is a kind of "divine dance of painting", reminiscent of the repeated, graceful movements of ritual prayer.

Ehsaey's freedom of expression comes after many years of diligent training and practice, mastering the art of many styles of calligraphy. He twists, rotates, stacks and stretches the words, repeating vertical strokes with a living, breathing spiritual energy, at times gentle and fluid, and at others wild and visceral, transmitting a quality of burning, and passion for God. The repetition of Allah takes on myriad forms and patterns, such as the vertical column of yellow Allah with scarlet accents [Fig. 6]. Often the name Allah stands alone, while in other pieces, a dynamic tension is created by images of the Word, yearning and pulling towards each other like a tide, the soul's longing to return to the infinite ocean of Being. In Fig. 7, the name Allah is rotated in four directions. Painted in warm peach tones, the fluid forms of the words take flight, like birds, or the wings of the heart. Fred Shoai suggests the image is evocative of the *tawaf*, the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, the cube-shaped holy shrine of Islam in Mecca.<sup>9</sup> The weightlessness and freedom of the works is enhanced by the framing; floated between glass and framed in gold or black, the

paintings seem to emanate from the depths of space.

One wall of the gallery is hung with traditional calligraphies of Persian poetry and passages from the Quran, many written in scarlet ink on gold leaf [Fig. 8]. They provide a contrast to the painterly work, with their highly controlled and refined calligraphic mastery. Ehsaey's rendering of the *Fatiha*, the opening *sura* (chapter) of the Quran, is a calligraphy of exquisite beauty, delicacy and grace, written on shell-pink paper [Fig. 9]. Several other pieces are written in *nastaliq*, a distinctive Persian script preferred for the writing of mystical poetry, which flows in gentle diagonal lines across the page. A gallery visitor I later spoke with became full with emotion when he recalled the beauty of these pieces, which for him embody the spiritual essence of Islam.

Ehsaey says he uses the words 'la ilaha illa Allah', and the name Allah as symbols, as an invitation and doorway to the Divine Reality which "convey the inner meaning of the *zikr*". Releasing himself of all thought and intention, Ehsaey becomes an empty vessel, a clear conduit for divine expression, and is completely absorbed in *zikr* while painting. He describes the process as effortless and without mind: "I don't think of anything when I am working. I am only concentrated on the Word. The work is worship because it comes from God." Painting becomes a unifying experience in which the veils dividing Creator, creation, seer and seen, fall away. The seer and the seen become one, and God alone is real.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Hattstein, 'Islam – World Religion and Cultural Power', p. 13.

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<sup>10</sup> Barks and Green, *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis*, pp. 46, 56.



Fig. 2: *Dastafshani* series, teal/blue gouache, black enamel on mat board, 45x45 cm

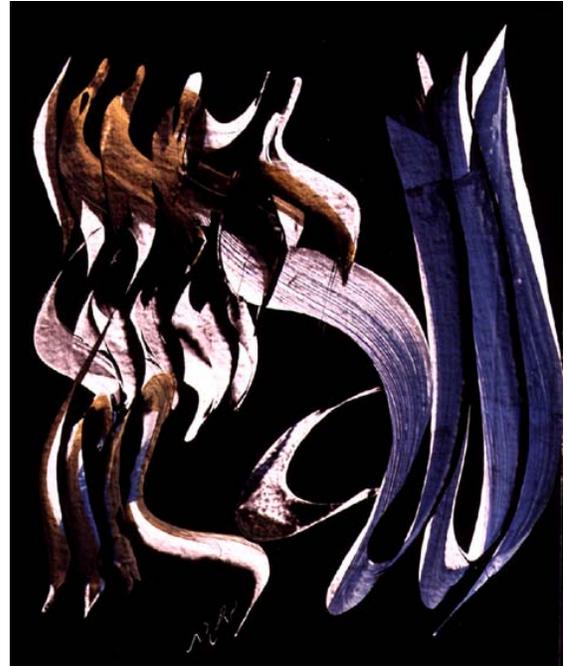


Fig. 4: *Dastafshani* series, blue gouache, black enamel on mat board



Fig. 3: *Dastafshani* series, red/ochre gouache, black enamel on mat board, 50x70 cm



Fig. 5: *Dasafshani* series, black enamel on board, 70x100 cm



Fig. 6: *Dastafshani series*, yellow/vermillion gouache, black enamel on mat board, 50x50 cm

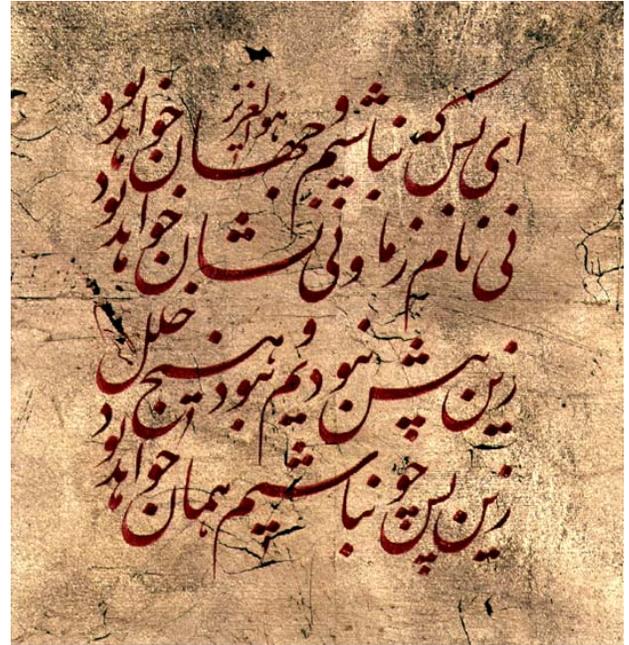


Fig 8: Red ink on gold leaf



Fig. 7: *Dastafshani series*, peach/grey gouache, black enamel on mat board, 70x70 cm

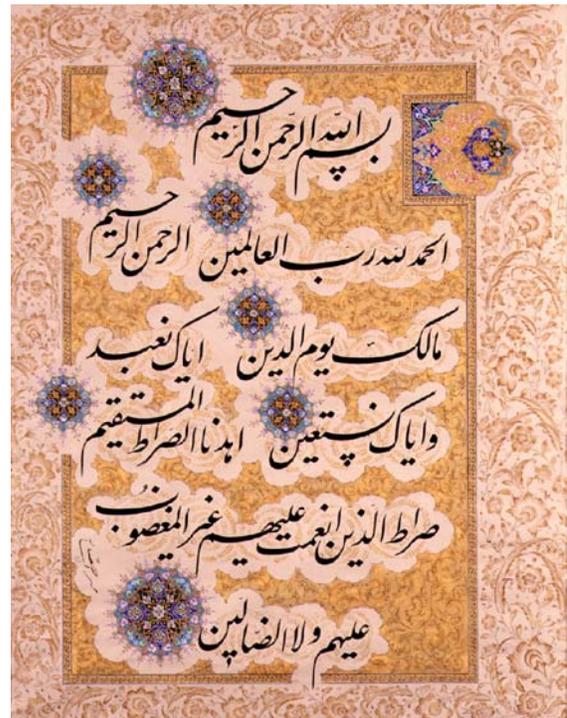


Fig 9: Opening *sura* of the Quran, black ink on pink paper

In excerpts from his artist's statement, Mr. Ehsaey describes his long period of effort, trial and error, and ultimately, self-surrender to reach this state of union:

With calligraphy in the early days, I tried to elevate my work through technical skill, which took hard work and persistence for many years. I then tried to transform this technical skill into a spiritual art. My attempts seemed fruitless, and I have to confess that 'achievement' was gained through 'failure'. I finally understood that technical perfection in art is a contradiction. Art has to flow, and cannot be forced.

For peace of mind, and developing deep concentration, I started writing on scrap paper... then disposing of it with tranquility and ease. Now and then, I used to select some pieces among the works and concentrate on them. This 'intention of writing' was another stage, which I later abandoned.

The discipline I forced on myself has set me free. There is no longer any distance between my art and myself. What you see has been done with ease and without endeavour.... These paintings have been created from my heart and soul. I offer them to you.

For Ehsaey, this act of creation is a sacred union between the soul of the artist and the Beloved, a mystery which, he says, "cannot be described in words", and then adds, "That is why I make art". The image that is created is the visual manifestation of *baraka*, spiritual energy or grace, which touches the innermost heart of the viewer, continually beckoning the heart into contemplation and remembrance of the One. Ehsaey offers, "Each person is invited to interpret and experience the art in their own hearts. Awakening to the Word is the effect of the knowledge or energy that is already inside of us. The soul is drawn to the awakened state, and recognizes it."

I asked Mr. Ehsaey if he considered his art to be a spiritual service, bringing the Divine Word to others. He responded,

My work is a personal statement...art is an instrument for people to experience meaning, to access the unknown, to make a connection. Art is a tool...which opens communication with others, but not while I am doing it, only afterwards. While I am doing my art, I don't think of anything. I just do it! Because I have to do it!

This passion and inspiration is transmitted through his painting, and can be felt by viewers who may not have any knowledge of Islamic calligraphy. Describing the power of the word Allah as a symbol, Ehsaey explains,

The Word is sacred. It is how the Prophet Muhammad received the holy Quran. Word is how this treasure has been transmitted. The symbol carries an energy of its own, which is recognizable to others, even if they are not familiar with Arabic or Islam. This is because in all traditions and all cultures, Truth is One.

*Dastafshani* coincided with *The Spirit of Islam*, an exhibit on Islamic calligraphy at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (October 2001 – May 2002), one of the first major museum exhibitions of Islamic art in Canada. Mr. Ehsaey presented slide lectures and calligraphy workshops as part of the museum's educational programming. Visit *The Spirit of Islam* web site at <[www.moa.ubc.ca/spiritofislam](http://www.moa.ubc.ca/spiritofislam)>. For information about future exhibits and calligraphy workshops, please contact Fred Shoai, Director, Ziba Art and Framing, email: <[ziba\\_gallery@hotmail.com](mailto:ziba_gallery@hotmail.com)>, phone: 604-734-0309.

**Editor's Note:** Permission to reproduce the artwork in this essay was granted by the artist S. Mohammad Ehasey.

## Notes on Contributors

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**Steve Benthaim** is pursuing an Interdisciplinary Ph.D. at the University of Victoria, involving the Faculty of Education and the School of Child and Youth Care. His primary research interests are in the areas of transpersonal psychology, and relational issues within the context of spiritual community living. A member of the Editorial Board of *Illumine* for 2001-02, he also instructs courses in family counselling and ethical decision-making in the human services at UVic's Faculty of Human and Social Development.

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**Randy 'Peg' Peters** is writing his Ph.D. dissertation on 'George Grant's Religious Appropriation of Martin Heidegger' in the Humanities Department at Simon Fraser University. He teaches philosophy, ethics, and religious studies courses at SFU and Trinity Western University. An ordained minister, he also is editing a book entitled, *Athens and*

*Jerusalem: George Grant and the Interplay of Theology and Philosophy.*

**Leslie Stanick** is an artist, exhibit curator, and designer, completing an M.A. in Art Education at the University of Victoria. Her thesis, 'The Art of Prayer: Contemporary Expressions of the Sacred', explores both the experience of the artist in the use of art-making as a spiritual practice, and the remaining icon as a spiritual invitation and inspiration to others. She has interviewed artists working in the major faith traditions, and plans to continue her research in a Ph.D. program.

**Nancy Yakimoski** is working on a Ph.D. in the Department of History in Art at the University of Victoria. Her doctoral dissertation examines how Queen Elizabeth I of England is represented in sixteenth-century painted portraits and in twentieth-century film. Other ongoing research projects include analyzing how powerful women are portrayed on television, specifically, Seven of Nine and the Borg Queen (from 'Star Trek') and Buffy (from 'Buffy, the Vampire Slayer'). She teaches as a sessional instructor at UVic in the areas of art history and visual culture and in the Department of Visual Art at Camosun College.